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THE
WIFE HE NEVER SAW

BY

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THE WIFE HE NEVER SAW

CHAPTER I

A STRANGE PROPOSAL

As the green baize door of the private office swung softly behind them, the two men regarded each other with a look of reciprocal scrutiny, each taking the measure of the other. They stood, silent, the younger in an attitude of eager expectancy, the other with a studied outward show of indifference. Their eyes met for an instant, and those of the younger man dropped. He was the first to speak.

"I came in response to your letter," he said briskly. "I hope it isn't anything unpleasant?"

He met the cold, unemotional stare of the other steadily, a puzzled expression on his face. Aware that he stood in the presence of the famous

Thurlow Weed Benson, one of the acknowledged leaders of the New York bar, he felt a leaping curiosity to learn why the eminent attorney had sent for him.

"Mr. Tile," said the lawyer, in a hard, metallic voice, "as we are members of the same profession, it is unnecessary for me to pledge you to the strictest confidence with regard to anything that may transpire in this office."

The young man hastened to assure the legal luminary that the seal of secrecy would remain inviolate.

"Sit down," commanded Benson.

They sat facing each other across a long table, piled high with legal documents and law books.

Tile had never seen the famous attorney before, although he had known him by reputation for many years. He studied the deeply lined face, with its thin mouth, slightly protruding chin, inquisitive nose, and heavy grey eyebrows, beneath which two small, grey eyes sparkled like sharp points of steel. It was not an inviting countenance, yet there was nothing repulsive in its aspect.

The suggestion of cunning that lurked in its

lines was offset by a sort of grim humour, expressed in the faint smile that hovered perpetually about the lips. It was a face to inspire terror in a witness, confidence in a client. One felt intuitively that one's affairs were safe in Benson's hands; litigants had only to observe him casually to know that all the resourcefulness of his crafty brain would be exercised relentlessly in their behalf.

"I presume you are anxious to know why I sent for you?"

"I am."

Benson's eyes narrowed again on the young man, as though examining him for a vulnerable spot. He seemed uncertain how to begin the communication he wanted to impart. As if to gain additional moments for reflection, he lifted a pair of black-rimmed spectacles from the table, wiped the glasses with a handkerchief, and laid them down again.

"You are unmarried?" he asked suddenly.

"I am," replied Tile.

"And in need?"

The blunt query sent a wave of resentment to the young man's face. He thought that he de-

tected in it a humiliating offer of alms, which called for a spirited reply; but he checked his impulse, and admitted:

"My financial condition could not be worse."

"How should you like to earn a hundred thousand pounds?"

The question, fired at Tile in a voice as empty of feeling as the report of a toy pistol, induced a conviction that the lawyer was making sport of him. He scrutinised Benson closely, but was unable to detect the slightest suggestion of raillery in his face.

"How should I like to earn a hundred thousand pounds?" repeated the young lawyer, in slow accents.

"Yes," snapped Benson.

An equivocal smile overspread the young man's countenance. "Show me the man, and you may notify the undertaker," he replied.

"No—you'll not have to commit murder for it," returned Benson. "Nor will you be asked to engage in any criminal enterprise."

"But some sort of equivalent will be demanded for the money," commented Tile. "What is it?"

Benson moved his chair closer, and lowered his voice. "Get married to-morrow," he said.

A dazed expression appeared on the young man's face; the lines of his forehead gathered in perplexity between his eyebrows.

"Where shall I find the lady?" he inquired.

"I'll tell you." Without further preliminaries, Benson relieved himself of the proposal which he had in mind when he sent the note to the obscure young lawyer.

"The proposition is just this," he said. "A young woman, accompanied by an elderly man, will appear in this office at noon to-morrow. The woman's features will be hidden beneath a heavy veil, and they will not be revealed to you at the time of the marriage, nor at any other time. The marriage contract will be ready for signature; and I, as a notary, will formally acknowledge the document. The lady's signature will be covered when you attach your name to the contract, and you are to make no effort to see it. Nor must you make any attempt to see her face.

"When you have signed the contract, you will have earned the hundred thousand pounds—that is, if you do not violate the conditions attached

to the marriage. These conditions will remain in force for five years, at the end of which time the lady will obtain a divorce, and you will be free to marry whom you choose."

Tile listened, with a half-amused smile on his face. He was uncertain whether to burst into laughter or angrily accuse the lawyer of making sport of him. But the set earnestness of Benson's face convinced him that the offer was not made as a joke.

"What conditions are attached to this strange marriage?" he asked.

"They are very simple and easy to observe. The hundred thousand pounds will be placed in trust. You will receive the income, at five per cent.—or five thousand pounds a year. You must agree to make no effort to learn the identity of the lady, or to find out the reason for her unusual matrimonial venture. Steps will be taken to assure ourselves of the close observance of these conditions on your part. Each time you violate your promise, whether consciously or unconsciously, you will lose one-fifth of the principal of the trust fund. Five violations will mean the total loss of the hundred thousand pounds."

"Then I am to be under surveillance?"

"In a way, yes. But it need cause you no uneasiness. No detectives will shadow you; nothing will be done to make you uncomfortable. All you'll have to do will be to forget your marriage, and to act as if it had never taken place."

Tile pondered the proposition, trying to detect the "catch," or the hidden spring that would reveal the jack-in-the-box. It looked too easy to be real; he felt that there was something specious about the offer—its glitter was too dazzling.

"How will you know whether I violate any of the conditions attached to the marriage?" he asked, trying to draw the lawyer out.

"That is one of the things I cannot tell you," replied Benson.

The increasing perplexity on Tile's face did not go unobserved by the eminent lawyer. It was plain that the young man was hesitating—but whether from doubt of the genuineness of the offer, or from revulsion at the sordid circumstances of the marriage, he could not tell.

"Why was I chosen in the matter?" asked Tile, coming out of a deep abstraction.

"That is another question I cannot answer,"

snapped Benson, as though resentful of the other's curiosity.

"Then, as I understand the proposition," summarised the young man, "I am to receive a hundred thousand pounds at the end of five years for marrying a woman I don't know, whose face I am not to see, whose reasons for the strange step I am not to inquire into?"

"That is the case precisely."

"And I am to stake my self-respect—possibly my entire future—on the transaction?" His incisive tone shook Benson's conviction that the terms would be accepted.

"You stake nothing," declared the great lawyer. "It is purely a business transaction. There are weighty reasons for the marriage taking place; and, if you carry out the conditions of the contract, you will have given ample return for the money. It need not injure your self-respect—you need give up none of the ideals you possess with regard to marriage. Simply hold them in abeyance for five years. And, as for your future, it will be assured rather than marred."

"But there must be some scandal—perhaps some colossal intrigue—behind this," persisted

Tile. "Or else why should anyone be willing to part with so much money on such easy terms?"

"There is no scandal, and no intrigue," Benson assured him. "I pledge my word for it." He had anticipated every objection, and was prepared to argue Tile into acquiescence. "It is a rare opportunity to establish yourself on a sound financial basis," he said, "and it rests with you whether you will seize or reject the chance that has come to you. At one minute past twelve to-morrow, the opportunity will have vanished for ever."

To leap from poverty to wealth, from want to luxury—to become financially independent without effort of his own—was not in the scheme of things as Tile had planned it. He was possessed of a vaulting ambition to land at the top of his profession; and, in common with most young men of strong imagination, he had dreamed of fame as a prize to be gathered with the first case which should present the opportunity to display his high attainments. But his sparse practice had yielded no such opportunity.

Five years after being admitted to the bar, he found himself still an obscure lawyer, his exer-

tions directed mainly toward staving off financial vacuity. Even that task had finally got beyond him; at the present time, he was beset by clamorous creditors, and the question of his next meal was a serious problem.

As his eyes wandered uneasily about the room, he tried to meet the questions that framed themselves in his mind. Yes, Benson's offer was undeniably tempting; yet it repelled his better nature. Marriage was too sacred an institution to be bartered and flaunted in this easy fashion. And what of the woman in the case? What of her who was so ready to lend herself to this humiliating transaction? Where were those finer attributes which he invariably associated with the women of his acquaintance? What was the character of the unknown wife to whom he must couple himself for five years?

Marriage had always been a vague possibility with him, but an ever-present one. And if he should meet the woman of his fancy, what then? Could he ever hope to overcome the handicap of such an alliance as the one he was asked to make? Would it not remain, through life, a stain upon his ideals?

Other questions passed through his mind in rapid succession—questions which admitted of no evasion. They would have to be faced, one day—perhaps in the remote future—but they would loom up to harass, and, perhaps, to destroy his happiness. Would a woman of refined instincts ever condone this selfish marriage for money? The indisputable answer to this query was, No.

Tile's gaze returned to the lawyer.

"It is a heavy sacrifice——"

"Sacrifice!" interrupted Benson. "I tell you, there's no sacrifice entailed on your part."

"I am thinking of the woman," Tile replied gallantly.

"You needn't worry about her," Benson replied. "This marriage is not a whim. It is a step decided on after mature deliberation."

Again Tile lapsed into silence. He was bewildered, overwhelmed by the fortune that was dangled so temptingly before his eyes. His wavering mind alternated between consent and refusal, swung uncertainly between the pleasant beckoning of the money and the repelling conditions attached thereto. He was unable to decide.

"Oh, I forgot to mention," Benson flashed suddenly, "that you receive the first year's income on signing the marriage contract. Five thousand pounds will be paid to you at noon to-morrow."

"And I have until then to decide?" Tile asked.

"You have."

"Very well; I will reserve my answer until then."

Tile left the office as one in a dream.

CHAPTER II

THE BIG AUTOMOBILE

TILE possessed none of youth's reckless eagerness to engage in strange adventures not connected with the practice of law. He preferred to carve his future after his own pattern, rather than to entrust it to blind faith.

Throughout his college days, and through the five years of struggle and hardship in the big city, he had held fast to certain ideals. He had followed a line of conduct which, he argued, must inevitably lead him to the goal. He was not to be lured out of the path of his deliberate choosing by any promise of specious pleasure or exciting adventure. He would make his own way; and, whatever his ultimate destiny, he would be guided to it by the light of his own reason.

Not in his wildest dreams had the fancy ever

occurred to him that he would be offered a hundred thousand pounds, an independent fortune, to engage in a tentative marriage for five years. The idea seemed grotesque. But it was impossible to challenge successfully Benson's good faith, though he could not rid himself of a lingering belief that the offer hid some grim joke, with himself as the victim. He became aware of a rising impulse to reject the proposal, to refuse the tarnished gold, to retain his self-respect, to avoid entanglements, the hidden nature of which he was unable to discern. But, when he entered the boarding-house in which he lived, and surveyed the bare, gloomy walls of his narrow bedroom, the scales began to shift.

That hundred thousand pounds, with its attendant income of five thousand pounds a year, kept tantalising him with its delightful possibility of exchanging his present surroundings for the better environment which he craved.

As he contemplated Benson's proposition, he could not help a feeling of satisfaction that he had not put behind him for ever the opportunity which it offered. He was frankly glad that it was still open to him, although it was far from

his immediate purpose to seize it. Nevertheless, the more he examined it, the less objectionable it seemed to become.

Slowly, he marshalled before him all the circumstances of his present position.

His financial resources were exhausted. There were no more friends from whom he could borrow. His parents were dead; he had no responsibilities beyond those attached to himself.

He had made many friends in college, and had cultivated them in the city. Through their influence, he had obtained sufficient legal business to eke out a bare existence. But no new cases had come to him lately, and there were no signs of more favourable prospects for the immediate future.

Yet his needs were immediate and pressing. For a year, he had steadily refused all social invitations, because of his inability to reciprocate. The solitude of his life had begun to pall on him, but he was resolved not to become a "sponger." He preferred to retain his independence, though it necessitated self-ostracism from the society he craved.

He had no entanglements with women; there

was no one to whom he was even remotely attached by anything stronger than ordinary friendship. Nor did he know of one who was otherwise attached to him.

His eyes wandered about the bare room, resting finally on a folded sheet of note-paper lying on the dressing-table. His perplexity was heightened as he read the contents of the note:

"Unless you can pay the three weeks' board you owe, I must ask you to vacate your room to-morrow."

He permitted the note to flutter to the floor, and returned to his chair, losing himself in further contemplation of the gloomy outlook.

"The devil times his strokes well," he murmured.

The loose change in his pocket was all that was left of the last five pound note he had borrowed. He figured that he owed almost forty pounds—not a large amount in itself, but staggering to one without prospect of replenishing his exchequer.

The threatened eviction could not be averted, he knew, by vague promises of future payment. Then there was his office rent, also long overdue;

and he realised that it was only a question of days before he would be asked to vacate.

The knowledge that to-morrow, if he chose, he could come into possession of five thousand pounds, gave him a pleasant thrill. The conditions attached to the acceptance of the fortune seemed to lose some of their repulsiveness.

"Well, suppose I do get married for five years?" he asked himself. "It is a marriage in form only—it entails no degrading relationship. And the fact that I am not to see the woman makes the proposition more attractive. I prefer not to know her. I can dismiss her from my mind the moment the contract is signed. This pestering of creditors will cease, and I'll be able to move among my friends."

The hopelessness of his financial condition preyed on Tile's mind throughout the evening, made the night one of dreary wakefulness, and sent him down to breakfast the following morning, blear-eyed and with hollow cheeks. He was met at the threshold of the dining-room by the landlady.

"I must have money to-day," she said firmly. "I have to pay my expenses, and can't wait for

ever for my rent." She mistook the distant stare in his eyes for doubt as to his ability to meet her demand. "I must have my money," she repeated, "or my room."

"You shall have your money and your room this afternoon," he replied.

"Of course, I don't want to lose you as a lodger," she assured him, in a softer voice. "But, you know, I have to meet my bills, and I am entirely dependent on the income from this house."

"I appreciate your position fully," he replied. "It isn't fair to keep you waiting. I will pay you this afternoon."

"But why do you want to move, if you can pay?" she inquired. "If I had thought that my asking for the money would be taken as an insult——"

"Not at all—not at all," he assured her. "I have simply decided to move into better quarters. I shall engage a suite at the Cosmos Club."

It gave him a pleasant thrill to see the changed attitude of the importunate landlady. He had experienced the first warm sensation of financial independence—the inward joy it produced almost

made him ashamed of himself. On the way to Benson's office a vague fear possessed him—the dread that something might have occurred to cause a withdrawal of the offer. Tremulously, shaken by conflicting emotions, he entered the outer office of the lawyer. Benson emerged from his private room, a cold, almost disdainful smile hovering about his lips.

"I thought you'd come," was his confident greeting. "It is ten minutes to twelve," he said, consulting his watch. "You may wait in my room."

Almost shamefacedly, Tile followed the lawyer, and seated himself in an obscure corner of the private room. Thoughts raced through his brain in hazy succession, like vague, intangible objects through a mist. He pressed his hands to his heart, as though to moderate its pulsations. Benson seemed not to notice him, and his indifference aggravated the situation. The young man felt that he deserved the silent contempt with which the old lawyer must regard him.

As the minutes sped, Tile began to speculate on the appearance of the bride. What sort of

costume would she wear? Was she old, or young —beautiful or ugly? What influence would she exert on his future? Was her reason for lending herself to this loveless match less sordid than his own? Was she nursing a secret sorrow, or reckoning a future gain? What effect would the marriage have on her own life?

Above all his speculation, one question kept forcing itself into the forefront of his consciousness, remaining there with a persistency which finally broke his silence.

"Mr. Benson," he said, in husky tones, "there is just one question I must ask, and I think I am entitled to a frank answer."

"What is it?" snapped Benson.

"I have wondered why the woman in this strange case is willing to enter into marriage under such peculiar circumstances. Only one reason has occurred to me; it is the reason that would be assigned by the world, if the transaction ever became known. Has she——"

"Dismiss that thought at once!" cried Benson. "Get that right out of your mind. I told you no scandal is involved in this matter."

Without being able to assign a plausible reason

for it, Tile became conscious of a growing aversion for the old lawyer.

"The old fox sized me up right," he said to himself. "He was sure of me from the moment he set eyes on me. He knew I'd acquiesce in the arrangement—he sensed the weak spot in my nature. But I wonder how he came to pick me for the bridegroom?"

Recalling Benson's words of the previous day, he gave no utterance to his thoughts, but remained silent and moody until he was brought out of his abstraction by the swish of skirts. Looking up, he saw a woman's form outlined against the green door. She was dressed in a grey travelling gown, her hands encased in snow-white gloves, her features securely hidden behind a heavy green veil, that was pinned beneath her chin. Although he stared hard, he was unable to obtain the slightest glimpse of the contour of her face.

Behind her entered a middle-aged man, of sallow complexion and vacuous expression. His soft tread, obsequious manner, and the alert position he occupied at her elbow, suggested a well-trained servant or confidential secretary.

Tile made an awkward figure as he stood shifting from one foot to the other, but the woman seemed to be totally oblivious of his presence. She extended a gloved hand to Benson, who whispered something in her ear. It was plain that her presence exerted a strange influence upon the lawyer, for his tense face relaxed into an expression of the utmost solicitude.

"So this is the bride!" thought the young man. He studied her figure closely.

It was superb, he acknowledged to himself. The graceful lines had an alluring quality, that was heightened by the erect carriage and by the slightly upward tilt of the head. She seemed to be possessed of a quiet dignity, of an air of refinement, stamping her unmistakably a woman of breeding. Tile felt drawn to her irresistibly; it was hard to check an impulse to apologise on the spot for the part he had agreed to perform in the transaction.

"This is Mr. Tile." Benson waved a hand.

The woman nodded her head slightly; the eyes of her companion narrowed on Tile, as if trying to bore their way into his innermost consciousness.

The young man came forward, shuffling uneasily, like a guilty schoolboy, a wave of red mantling his face. The certainty that she was measuring him from beneath the heavy veil kindled a desire to renounce the part he had agreed to play. In another moment, he would have fled incontinently from the room; but the ceremony had begun.

"Everything is understood between the high contracting parties," came in even tones from Benson. "Kindly sign the marriage contract."

The woman accepted the pen which Benson extended, and rapidly affixed her signature to the document. The lawyer covered her name with the edge of a blotter, then handed the pen to Tile, whose reluctance vanished at sight of the indifferent manner the woman had displayed on signing the paper. With bold strokes, he wrote his name on the line indicated by the lawyer. Benson and the woman's escort appended their names as witnesses, and the transaction was concluded.

"I now pronounce you man and wife," intoned Benson, folding the paper and locking it in a drawer of his desk.

"Now that we are married——" ventured Tile, with a forced smile; but the rest of the sentence was cut off by a warning gesture from the famous lawyer.

"Remember," said Benson, "your curiosity will be costly." He nodded respectfully to the woman, who left the room, followed by the middle-aged man.

When the door had swung behind her, the lawyer handed Tile a cheque for five thousand pounds. "That is all, young man," he said.

The burning curiosity that possessed the brideless bridegroom was unsatisfied by the curt dismissal. He hastened to the lift, and waited impatiently for it. The woman with the green veil crowded all other visions out of his mind; the thought of never seeing her again aroused all the combativeness of his nature. He almost leaped for the lift, pacing its narrow space on the way to the ground floor.

Shouldering his way through a crowd of waiting passengers in the lower corridor of the building, he shot through the revolving door and into the street, in time to see a big automobile bearing

the woman and her companion through the lines of vehicles. It was too late to reach her, but he could still make out the number of the car.

He jotted it down on a slip of paper, and started for the bank with the cheque.

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CHAPTER III

ONE FASCINATING WOMAN

FOR a month, Frederick Tile struggled with his curiosity, trying valiantly to forget that he was married, to erase the disconcerting mystery from his mind. But his curiosity seemed to fatten and grow on the destructive methods he tried, until it became a passion with him—a haunting presence, that filled his waking hours and robbed his nights of slumber.

Outwardly, he had blossomed into a new being. Clothes of the latest shades and most fashionable cut draped his tall, athletic form. His frank, open face had lost its worried look; but a new expression had crept into his countenance—an expression that gave him the appearance of walking constantly in a dream. His eyes seemed for ever trying to penetrate the dim distance, as though searching for something vague and elusive.

The problem of earning his living had passed out of his life, but a new problem had entered —one infinitely more difficult to solve. He tried to turn from it, to keep it behind him; but it held him with the compelling force of the alluring personality that dominated it.

Tile had left the boarding-house and taken up quarters at the Cosmos Club. Having no law practice to which to devote himself, he became a familiar figure on the bridle path in Central Park, on the golf links, in drawing-rooms, and in the smoking-room of the club. He renewed old friendships and cultivated new ones, always with the timid hope of one day solving the riddle into which he had plunged.

Curiosity held Tile in its unrelenting grip. He appreciated the urgent reason for breaking its clutch—the fortune he had so easily acquired was in danger of slipping away. He could see the advantage of going off somewhere, to some foreign country, where no lurking danger of losing the immense dowry awaited him. But he could not bring himself to travel. The city seemed to have exerted a new and subtle attraction for him, which it was impossible to escape.

And that new attraction was easily explained. It resulted from the same pride which draws the man of self-acquired wealth back to the scenes of his early poverty, to exhibit his success before those most closely associated with his youthful struggles.

New York had known Tile as an obscure young lawyer, balancing himself uncertainly on the edge of poverty, deprived, through lack of money, of the pleasures and associations to which he felt entitled by birth and breeding. Now, Tile was resolved to occupy what he regarded as his right-ful place in the life of the city. He wanted to taste the ease and luxury of his five thousand a year where he had swallowed the coarser nourishment of his penniless days. He recoiled from the idea of making new acquaintances in strange places; he longed to mingle as a new man among old friends.

And, then, there was—the woman.

Veiled, mysterious, alluring, she had captivated his mind, subjugated his thoughts, defeated every resolve he had made with regard to her. A moment after the automobile that contained her

had turned the corner, he had made certain wise resolutions.

He would obliterate the marriage from his mind.

He would find something useful to occupy his time.

He would not permit the fire of his ambitions to wane.

He would continue in the easier paths of life, but with firm steps and head set against any backward glance in the direction of Benson's office.

Above all—he would stifle curiosity with a ruthless hand.

It had been easy to make these resolutions. To carry them out seemed but a mere effort of will. And Tile felt himself possessed of sufficient will-power to combat successfully whatever temptations might arise to defeat his purposes.

Thus do persons delude themselves that will is an engine to be started by mere concentration of thought. And thus did Tile fail to take into account the insistent pressure of external circumstances which, in the end, make a plaything of will.

So, for a month he set that delusive, indomitable will of his against the intrusion of the forbidden personality of his unknown wife, and in the end found himself intently trying to pierce the veil that had screened her face on the day of the marriage. And, although his sense of caution warned him against it, he began making vague plans to ascertain her identity.

He guessed that she was a woman moving in high social circles, and society quickly became for him not a pastime, but a pursuit. Amusements which bored most men, and which they shunned as they would the plague, drew him with a peculiar force. And while he floundered about in the social swirl, the determination to find some useful employment slipped out of his mind.

"What's the matter with you, Tile?" asked Jimmy Carlton, one night at the club. "You go about as though you were in a perpetual trance. What the devil do you see in those afternoon teas you attend, anyway?"

He and Jimmy had been chums at college, and it was Jimmy whom he had "touched" oftenest in the dark days preceding the marriage.

"I don't know what's the matter with myself," returned Tile. "I guess I need something to occupy my mind."

"The trouble with you is that you're too preoccupied with something that's worrying you," Carlton declared. "Ever since you came into that money, you've been acting like a man in a dream. Even the women folk have observed it."

Tile sank deeper into the soft leather chair, cushioning his head against his hands. "Some day, Jimmy," he said, "I'm going to tell you the strangest adventure that ever befell a man in this city. I'm just bursting with it, but there are circumstances which seal my lips now. In about five years from now, I'm going to enlighten you —that is, if I'm not in a lunatic asylum before then."

"As bad as that?" mused Jimmy. "Who's the woman?"

A sudden tremor galloped up and down Tile's spine. He paled with the fear that he had made his first blunder and had deprived himself of twenty thousand pounds. His eyes narrowed on his friend, as though trying to read his innermost thoughts.

Jimmy's bland smile reassured him, however, and he smiled in return. No, Jimmy had not been set to watch him; he was certain of it.

"You mustn't try to draw me out," he pleaded. "It wouldn't be hard to induce me to take someone into my confidence, but I'm under a pledge, the violation of which might be costly to me."

"Oh, very well," Jimmy returned lightly. "But why the devil do you arouse my curiosity?"

Tile shrugged his shoulders, and let his mind revert to the unknown woman and her companion. This time, the face and figure of the man loomed biggest before him. He could not help feeling that this individual, so meek in the presence of the woman who was now Mrs. Tile, possessed a frigid malignity of character beneath his inoffensive exterior. Tile came to hate him with the same unreasoning intensity with which he was beginning to hate Benson. And for no other reason than that they shared his secret.

"What the deuce are you thinking about?" suddenly fired Carlton.

The question brought Tile out of his abstraction. "Oh, nothing in particular," he gasped.

"Of course not," Jimmy commented sarcastically. "By the way," he added, "if we are going to the affair at the Trasks', we'd better be getting dressed."

Two hours later they emerged from the club, and sauntered up Fifth Avenue, Jimmy puzzling over the preoccupied expression of his companion.

"Is she a blonde or brunette?" he asked tauntingly.

Tile ignored the question, not being in a frame of mind to enjoy his friend's levity. Nor did he hear the volume of information which Jimmy poured forth about the guests who were booked for the Trask affair. Unable to bring Tile out of his taciturnity, Carlton finally dropped into silence.

The two men were ascending the broad stone steps of the Trask mansion, when there occurred something which keyed all their senses to the highest pitch.

Carriages were discharging their occupants in rapid succession, the line of vehicles occupying the kerb for two blocks. Above the noise of grating wheels and bawling coachmen came the rapid

clatter of hoofs, pierced by the terrified screams of a woman.

Glancing sharply round, Tile and Carlton saw a driverless carriage, drawn by two runaway horses, within dangerous proximity to the line of waiting vehicles.

The side door of the carriage was ajar; and the form of a woman, with one foot on the step, was outlined sharply in the opening. Her figure followed the swaying motion of the carriage, occasionally projecting forward, as though she were uncertain whether to jump.

When the runaway horses were within thirty yards of the corner, Tile darted suddenly from between two waiting carriages, and took a firm position in the middle of the street. His obstructing figure caused the frightened horses to swerve just as his hand reached for the bridle. His fingers missed the leather straps, and he sprang backward in time to avoid the front wheels of the carriage.

"Don't jump! For God's sake, don't jump!" he shouted to the woman, who was on the point of throwing herself to the street.

Recovering his poise, Tile started after the

runaways. He observed the reins dragging in the street, and, extending himself in a great burst of speed, caught up with the carriage. With his left hand, he forced the woman back into the seat, banging the door shut; with his right, he gathered the reins as he ran. Seizing a lock of the horse's mane, just above the withers, he sprang to meet the animal's stride, landing with feet bunched beside the fore-hoofs. In the rebound, he vaulted to the brute's back, and swung himself astride.

Gripping the reins more tightly in his hands, he sawed savagely at the head of the horse, breaking its stride. In another length or two the animal's pace was broken from a run to a staggering walk.

After their first spasm of terror had passed, half a dozen coachmen and grooms had joined in pursuit of the runaways; and now they came up, in time to prevent the horses from wresting control out of Tile's hands. The foremost of the pursuers each seized a bridle with one hand, clapping the other over the horses' nostrils, with a squeeze that shut off the animals' wind.

Seeing the horses safe in the hands of their

captors, Tile swung himself down, and hastened to the assistance of the woman in the carriage.

He found that she had already opened the door and left the vehicle. With her hand braced against a supporting lamp-post, she stood, quivering, her vitality returning slowly. Tile observed the delicate paleness of her cheeks, and the ivory whiteness of the neck and shoulders, that rose in perfect lines from her low-cut dress. Her throat seemed choked with convulsive sobs, as though she had but now arrived at the full realisation of the danger from which she had been rescued.

The young man slipped an arm round her waist, and helped her toward the friendly shelter of an area-way. An excited group of men and women, anxious to express their admiration of his courage, impeded his progress. Observing Carlton in the group, he turned his charge over to him, and hastened to the Trask home, where he tried to lose himself among the brilliantly clad guests.

But Tile was not destined to obscurity that night. Splendid athlete that he was, he soon recovered from the exertion of his run and subsequent struggle on the back of the runaway horse;

to all outward appearances, he was as calm and unruffled as if nothing unusual had occurred. His demeanour only heightened the adulation that was showered upon him.

Tile was not permitted the self-effacement he sought at the reception. For all his disclaimer of having done anything unusual, he found himself compelled to accept the tributes of Mrs. Trask's guests. Not alone out of his inherent modesty, but from other and weightier reasons, he regretted having attention centred on himself. He had no desire to become conspicuous, for his practical legal training made him realise that social prominence, or eminence of any other kind, would arouse curiosity as to his personal affairs. Circumstances might compel him to the admission that he was married, while posing as a single man.

He knew, in a vague way, that solicitous mothers regarded him as a desirable match for their daughters, his reputed wealth having undergone the usual process of exaggeration in the course of transmission from mouth to mouth. He was aware, also, that his friends believed he had come into a substantial inheritance. Therefore,

the satisfaction he felt at having saved a human life was tinged with regret over the prominence into which he was thrust.

As for the identity of the woman he had saved, he gave it no thought until he met Carlton.

"Is she all right?" he asked.

Jimmy beamed on his friend with undisguised admiration. "I'm proud of you, old man!" he proclaimed, in a loud voice. "And, say," he added, "you'll open your eyes when you see her. She's a beauty—a superlative beauty."

"Did you escort her home?" inquired Tile, ignoring his friend's enthusiasm.

"Home—no!" responded Carlton. "I brought her right here. She was on her way to the affair when the horses bolted. The coachman was thrown from his seat, but luckily he suffered nothing worse than a few bruises. She was about to jump from the step of the carriage when you shoved her back. Had she followed her impulse, she'd undoubtedly be in the hospital now, instead of recovering her composure upstairs."

"She's a guest in this house!" Tile muttered vaguely. "That will draw me farther into the foreground. Why the devil didn't *you* stop the

horses?" he burst forth. "I want to mingle with the crowd. I can't afford to have its admiring gaze centred on me."

"Can't afford it?" returned Carlton. "Why not?"

The despairing gesture executed by Tile's hands served to whet his friend's curiosity.

"Because I can't," was Tile's enigmatical response.

"Well, you plunged into it of your own free will," Carlton persisted.

"I did it because I couldn't help myself," growled the other. "If I'd stopped to think——"

"It would have made no difference."

The voice was that of a woman. Its clear, musical ring, and the note of admiration in it, caused Tile to turn round with a start.

He met the smiling face of Mrs. Trask, and thrilled to the touch of the arm she thrust under his.

"Had you stopped to think," she continued, modulating her voice to a lower pitch, "you would have done exactly the same thing."

"It's kind of you to say that," he responded; "but, as a matter of fact, I've seen a hundred

men do more difficult feats in the various athletic sports at college."

"There is a wide difference between feats of strength, or skill, and acts of heroism," she declared, frankly delighted with his modest sincerity. "I cannot express my gratitude—you cannot realise how very much Ethel Sinclair means to me."

It was the first time he had heard the name of the woman whom he had rescued, and instantly he set to work, prodding his memory in an effort to recall whether he had ever met her before. He was unable to place her, for a reason which his hostess explained.

"Miss Sinclair has lived abroad most of her life," she informed him. "She arrived here only ten days ago, and this is the first formal affair she has attended. She is waiting in the library to express her thanks. It would not be the most unlikely thing in the world to have you fall in love with her. Wouldn't it make a splendid romance?"

If Tile had given utterance to his thoughts at the moment, the happy expression of his hostess's face would have faded to a look of deep anxiety.

For the budding romance she foresaw was to him a hideous possibility that threatened to thrust itself into the forefront of his life at every angle.

He had no false idea of being invulnerable to the charms of women. Sooner or later, he felt, his affections would be drawn irresistibly to someone. And he shuddered at thought of the tragic outcome.

Absorbed in vague speculations, he permitted himself to be led to the broad marble staircase that wound upward to the library. He seemed unconscious of the guiding figure at his side. Not until the heavy curtains brushed his form as he passed through them, and he found himself in the soft glow of a square room, lined with a multitude of books, did he come out of his preoccupied air.

At his entrance, a woman's figure rose vaguely in a corner. Her dim outline took on graceful form and, as his gaze steadied, he swayed for a moment, like a man overcome by a sudden intoxication. It was not so much the splendidly erect figure as the clearly chiselled features of the woman's face that recalled him to himself.

The words of introduction were barely out of Mrs. Trask's mouth before the vision stepped forward lightly, as though treading on air. As she approached she seemed to radiate a strange charm, that held him enthralled. A cold tremulousness seized him; he tried to account for it, but could not.

The hostess, observing his demeanour, promptly hit on an explanation of her own. It gave her an intense satisfaction, and she smiled indulgently on Tile.

"I will leave Miss Sinclair to express her feelings," she said; and, before Tile was aware of it, the curtains had folded behind her retreating form.

"I don't know how to thank you." Miss Sinclair broke the silence.

"By not mentioning it," stammered Tile.

Their glance met across the low mahogany table, and remained fixed in mutual frankness. He observed that, although her figure was fully rounded, as though its curves had attained completeness, her face was that of a girl. It had an elfish charm; yet the broad, clear forehead, the well-defined mouth, and firm chin bespoke the

even mentality of matured womanhood. Her blonde hair, done in a high coiffure, and the simple, effective lines of her cream-white dress, enhanced the alluring picture she made.

Tile, suddenly conscious that he was staring rudely at her, reluctantly shifted his eyes from her face. A wave of red mounted to his forehead, accentuating the schoolboy bashfulness that took possession of him.

"I—I can't help admiring you," he blurted.

The smile that seemed to hover perpetually about her lips vanished, leaving an embarrassed expression. "Let us go downstairs," she said, intimating that she would take his arm.

They descended to the foot of the stairs, each seemingly afraid to break the silence. Not until Mrs. Trask linked her arm in Tile's left and marched the couple about the ballroom, did they find anything to say to each other.

Miss Sinclair's beauty was of the bewildering kind, instantaneous in its effect, attracting or repelling at first sight. Had her hair been a shade lighter, and had the lines of her face tended in the slightest degree toward hardness, prudent men would have fled from her as from a dangerous

adventuress. But the radiance she shed was of the artless kind, that compels and holds men, and makes them want to linger in its pleasant light.

Tile was not the only one who felt overwhelmed by the charm of her presence. But he had a double advantage over all other admirers. For one thing, he had saved her life. But that would have been of no avail without the shrewd manœuvring of Mrs. Trask, who saw to it that he filled most of her time in the ballroom and escorted her to supper.

Whatever satisfaction he felt at finding himself on her right at the table was more than counterbalanced by the apprehensive shudders that racked his frame whenever his eyes strayed beyond her and rested on the face of the man at her left.

It was Benson!

Like a malign presence, he sat there, joining complacently in the conversation, politely attentive to those about him, but showing a deference at variance with his habitual demeanour, whenever addressed by Miss Sinclair. Although not a word passed between them to indicate it, Tile

felt that the acquaintance of the lawyer and the young woman antedated their meeting at Mrs. Trask's house.

He also felt resentful of the satisfaction which his uneasiness seemed to give Benson. The suspicion crossed his mind that Mrs. Trask had a purpose, not entirely disinterested, in keeping him and Miss Sinclair together during most of the evening. Her efforts, he thought, were fostered and encouraged by the lawyer, whose eyes seemed to mock him with their cold, palpably studied indifference.

To find himself seated next to a woman whose very smile invited confidence, and to be within earshot of the one man he dreaded above all others, seemed not entirely a fortuitous circumstance. It savoured of the cunning of a lawyer who had a hundred thousand pounds to save for a client.

As though to strengthen the impression that was rapidly growing to a certainty, Miss Sinclair suddenly bent an inquiring gaze on him, and said:

"Tell me something about yourself. I am curious to learn something of my rescuer."

"There is nothing to tell," he replied. "Mine has been a very commonplace existence."

"You are a lawyer, I believe?" she inquired.

"A lawyer without a client," he replied. Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, he asked: "How did you guess my profession?"

"Oh," she laughed, "Mr. Carlton informed me of it, on the way to the house."

"And you?" ventured Tile. "You, I believe, have been in the city only a short time. Mrs. Trask informed me of it."

"Yes—I have lived abroad most of my life."

"Do you prefer Europe to America?" It was a commonplace question, but he hoped to lead her on.

"I can't say," she replied. "I know so little of my own country that it would be unfair to judge."

"Do you intend remaining here long?"

"That depends upon circumstances over which I have no control."

Tile pondered the answer, casting sidelong glances at Benson. The lawyer, with one ear cocked, pretended a deep interest in the recital of

an adventure by a foreign-looking man opposite him.

"It would be impolite for me to inquire as to those circumstances," remarked Tile.

"It would be useless," she declared.

He wondered whether she knew she was being subjected to a cross-examination, or whether she regarded his questions as evidence of the natural curiosity he felt concerning her.

"I do love a mystery," he remarked, "especially when a most attractive and charming young woman is involved in it."

"I have an equal liking for mystery, when the man involved shows the attributes of a hero."

"Thank you." He nodded pleasantly. "But there is nothing mysterious about me."

"Then, surely you must have more to tell of yourself than the meagre announcement that you are a lawyer."

"Well, I was regarded as somewhat of an athlete at college."

"Interesting, but commonplace," she commented.

He wondered whether he was leading or being led, but he felt sufficiently certain of himself to

continue in the dangerous path he was treading. Benson's presence was a constant reminder of the costliness of over indulgence in the curiosity he felt. But, somehow, he was unable to turn the drift of conversation.

"There are things in every man's life which he does not care to reveal, even to his intimates," he said.

She bent forward eagerly, nodding encouragement. "Have you a dark secret?" she asked.

The manner of the inquiry confirmed his suspicions. A trap had been set for him, but he was determined to avoid it.

"Nothing of any consequence," he said lightly. He looked furtively at Benson, but the lawyer seemed to be absorbed elsewhere.

"I don't know why," persisted Miss Sinclair, "but I feel, somehow, that you haven't been entirely at your ease in my presence. I know it isn't nice or polite to say it, but I have had that feeling all the evening."

He eyed her steadily, as though trying to penetrate the meaning behind the remark.

"If I have been uneasy," he declared gallantly, "the reason is easy to find. I have been appre-

hensive of the moments you have devoted to others."

"Is that the only reason?"

He did not reply. The diners were leaving the round tables, the men making for the lounge to take advantage of the brief respite before the renewal of the dancing. He knew that her card was filled; others had claimed her as partner for the various dances. He would be unable to monopolise her during the rest of the evening.

In a way, he was glad of it. He wanted time for reflection. His mind was wavering between two conclusions. Either she was the woman he had married or she was a decoy set by Benson to lure him into violating the conditions of his contract.

For the rest of the night he determined to maintain a discreet silence. But he was unable to rid himself of the disturbing thought that the beautiful stranger was involved in the mystery of his own life. It preyed on his mind to such an extent that he did not recoil from Benson's touch when the lawyer laid a familiar hand on his shoulder.

"Too bad fate selected you as the man to save her life!" remarked Benson.

"Why?" Tile's heart was beating furiously.

"Because it places her under obligations to one——"

"Then she knows!" burst from Tile, almost before he was aware that he had said anything. His senses were swimming, perspiration was gathering on his forehead.

"Don't perturb yourself," advised the lawyer. "There is no harm done—as yet. But don't forget you are not single—you're a married man."

"And she"—in his eager, distraught state, all sense of caution, of restraint, vanished before the consuming breath of curiosity—"and she is my wife?"

Instantly he recognised his blunder, but the damage was done. His blood ran chilled, as if his body had been packed in ice. He turned an apprehensive, half-shamed countenance on Benson.

"Twenty thousand pounds!" pronounced Benson, with the air of a judge giving sentence. "You should be more cautious of your speech, or you'll spend your fortune in a night."

CHAPTER IV

BAFFLING CIRCUMSTANCES

TILE sank on a cushioned seat in the bright drawing-room, too greatly agitated, too sick at heart, to be conscious of the melancholy figure he made.

Inwardly, he cursed Benson—cursed the fate that had tempted him into yielding to the lure of the hundred thousand pounds—cursed himself for an unconscionable rascal, a masquerader who deserved to have the mask torn from his face.

The loss of the twenty thousand, a fifth part of his fortune, induced no pang of remorse. Somehow, he felt a strange exultation at having parted with it, though inadvertently.

"I have still eighty thousand left," he thought, and the reflection rekindled his courage. He would hold to the bargain he had made; he would hold to the fortune, if only to frustrate

the crafty Benson; he would not deliberately seek to fathom the strange circumstances surrounding his marriage, nor would he attempt to draw out Miss Sinclair. If she were his wife, she, too, was masquerading, and, of necessity, shared his guilt. If she were Benson's decoy, hired to lead him into forfeiting his fortune, she would play her game in vain.

On deeper reflection, he found it impossible to reconcile her frank, open countenance with the practice of a deception against which her superb womanhood must revolt. He could not believe her capable of guile, yet the circumstances fitted so closely, her conversation pointed so unerringly to a hidden design, that it was impossible to detach her from the miserable game in which he was involved.

Tile felt himself in a whirl of intrigue, fascinating if perturbing; he determined to see it through. "As a matter of fact," he muttered beneath his breath, "there is nothing else for me to do."

Looking up, he became aware of Miss Sinclair's figure framed in the doorway. The searching glances she cast about the room were

undoubtedly meant for someone whom she was anxious to find. An irresistible impulse made him leave his seat and hasten to her side.

"Can I be of service?" he asked.

She gave an involuntary start, as if the sound of his voice had recalled her to herself. "I am going," she said, extending her hand. "I wanted to find you, to thank you again for what you did. You saved my life." A shade of emotion crept into her even voice; the faintest tremor swept her frame. "I am grateful to you, Mr. Tile, and I hope we shall see each other again."

"I hope so, too," he responded fervently. He noticed that she recoiled from the warm pressure of his hand, and he wondered whether it was from shame or modesty. A third reason, also, occurred to him, draining the blood from his face.

"Perhaps Benson told her of the sordid marriage, and she is disgusted with me," he thought.

Again there came upon him that maddening desire to cast discretion to the winds and explain his unenviable position, but he had no opportunity to indulge it. She left him hopelessly

perplexed, and vaguely determined not to permit the acquaintanceship to end.

"Tile, old boy, you're in love. You've been hit good and hard. You've found your affinity, and you might as well acknowledge it." Carlton's voice jarred on his sensibilities.

He turned angrily on his friend. "You talk like a fool!" he snapped. "I'm no more in love than you are."

"Well, I'm on the verge of it," rejoined Carlton. "I had one dance with her—I tell you, she's worth while. Nothing silly or superficial there, old boy. I'm going to find out more about her."

Tile's face brightened perceptibly. He was about to make enthusiastic response; but the cold eyes of Benson, fixed on him with unwavering steadiness, checked his words.

At the lawyer's elbow stood the pasty-faced individual with the air of a menial, who had accompanied the veiled woman to Benson's office.

"Come on, Carlton," said Tile, taking his friend's arm. "Let's get out of here."

"Now that she's gone, it isn't worth while remaining," mocked Carlton.

They obtained their hats and coats, and sauntered toward the door, after bidding their hostess farewell. In the hall Tile encountered the woman's companion again. He, also, was ready to leave, and was evidently waiting for someone. Tile and Carlton descended the steps of the house and crossed the street.

"Let's wait a moment," suggested Tile.

They stood in the shadow of a large brownstone house, Carlton smiling, his friend visibly perturbed.

The door of the brilliantly lighted mansion across the way swung open, and a woman issued forth, followed by the man they had seen in the hall. A footman opened the door of a carriage, and the couple entered.

"It's she!" Carlton said aloud.

Tile did not respond. He wheeled abruptly and started down the avenue, as though trying to escape an unpleasant vision. His friend had difficulty keeping up, his physical exertions shutting off the flow of raillery that struggled for an

outlet. Not until they reached the club did Carlton gain sufficient breath to talk.

"What were you running away from her for?" he asked.

"I wasn't running away," Tile returned petulantly.

"I shouldn't think you'd want to."

The distraught bridegroom hastened to the lift, and, with a sigh of relief, shut the door of his room behind him. He undressed as quickly as his tremulous fingers would permit, threw himself into bed, and shut his eyes in an effort to forget the crowded incidents of the evening.

But closed eyes failed to woo slumber, and he tossed uneasily between the sheets. Try as he might, he was unable to dismiss from his mind the face and figure of the woman whose life he had saved. His thoughts clung to her; his vision followed her; his brain fairly reeled with the stimulating effect of her beauty. With the first faint flush of dawn, he fell into a fitful slumber, from which he awoke to find her still occupying his thoughts.

Further sleep being impossible, he dressed, ate a meagre breakfast, and plunged into the

bracing morning air, walking with the blind haste of a man bent on a life mission. The emerald stretch of Central Park attracted him, and he threaded its winding paths until his tired feet rebelled and he sank exhausted on a bench.

Her figure was still before him, but vague, like a tracing on veined marble. It grew fainter as drowsiness overtook him, until it became a mere mass of entangled strokes and tints, blurring finally into the increasing darkness of his mind. His head drooped to his shoulder, and he slept with a soundness that had been denied him in the soft embrace of his bed.

The painful pressure of a policeman's club, moving up and down his form, as though exploring it for the most vulnerable spot, brought him out of his slumber. He lifted his heavy eyelids and stared vacantly at the bluecoat.

"What's the matter? Was you afraid to go home in the dark?" inquired the policeman.

Tile looked cheerfully up to the sky, inhaled a deep breath, stretched his cramped limbs, and smiled serenely at his questioner. "I must have been asleep," he said, as though he had just arrived at a long-sought conclusion.

"Been out all night—eh?" prompted the guardian of the peace.

"No; but I was tired when I awoke, and I took an early morning stroll in the park," answered the young man. "I guess I'll walk on."

Unconsciously, he thrust his fingers into his pockets, as though searching for something.

The policeman evinced a curious interest in his actions. "You haven't been touched?" he asked solicitously.

A thorough exploration of Tile's pockets revealed that no intruding hand had disturbed their contents. The search, however, brought forth something which suggested a new idea to help the solution of what had become his life riddle.

Tile drew a card from an upper waistcoat pocket, and glanced at the number scrawled hastily on the back. He recognised the writing, and its relation to the marriage in Benson's office.

With resolute strides, he returned to the club.

Carlton was enjoying the procession of femininity as it passed the mullioned window on the Fifth Avenue side of the building—an amusement

that had become part of the daily routine of his life.

"Where have you been?" he said in greeting.

"I've been out for an early stroll," replied Tile. "You haven't anything special to occupy your time this morning, have you?"

"No."

"Will you do me a favour?"

"Sure, if it doesn't entail heavy labour."

"You're a member of the Automobile Club?"

"I am."

"Don't they keep a list of all cars licensed in this State?"

"I believe they do."

Tile copied the number from the back of the card on a slip of paper, and handed it to his friend. "Please go up there and find out who is the owner of this car," he requested.

Carlton eyed the number, a puzzled expression on his face.

"You haven't been run over?" he asked.

"No."

"Of course, the number of this car has nothing to do with Miss Sinclair," mused Carlton.

"Perhaps it has, and perhaps it hasn't," returned Tile. "But while you're gathering the information you want, I have something equally important to attend to——"

"Then it's important?" the friend broke in.

"Very important."

Carlton's eyes narrowed on Tile. "Look here, old man," he burst forth, "you've been acting blamed mysterious of late! Why don't you put a fellow on to what's up?"

"I can't," replied Tile, in serious tone. "You'll know, perhaps, a long time from now. I am involved, as I told you before, in the queerest mystery that ever beset a man in this town; and, with the exception of one incident in regard to it, I know as little about it as you do. If I told you what it would cost me to try to solve it, you'd laugh. In fact, you wouldn't believe me. Jim, old man"—he laid a hand affectionately on his friend's arm—"there is every reason in the world why I should not permit my curiosity to get the better of me. But, to save my life, I can't help probing into it, thrusting my nose where it is in danger of being pinched."

"The trouble with you, Fred," said Carlton,

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"is that this life of idleness doesn't agree with you. You ought to go to work. A man must be born to do nothing, to do it successfully. Why don't you resume the practice of law?"

"I would," replied Tile mournfully, "if I could get a case to arouse my interest."

"Well, go out and hustle for it," advised Carlton.

"It would be useless. If I ever get to hustling again, it will be to get to the bottom of the adventure about which my lips have been sealed."

"If there's anything like adventure in the air, for heaven's sake, let me in on it!"

"I may have to, before very long. Now, you hurry and find out the owner of the car whose number I gave you."

The two men parted in front of the club, Carlton starting uptown, Tile hastening in the direction of Sixth Avenue. His judgment urged him against the step he was about to take, but the mad impulse that was on him had passed beyond the restraining power of reason. He was jeopardising another twenty thousand pounds, he knew; but he recalled Benson's promise that he would not be shadowed, or subjected to any other

unpleasant surveillance. If no one was following him, he argued, it was unlikely that the lawyer would ever know of the shrewd move upon which he had decided.

He halted in front of a building that sheltered the various branches of the Health Department. As a lawyer, he knew that his marriage, to be binding, must be recorded with the Bureau of Vital Statistics. A copy of the marriage certificate must be filed within thirty days, and he reckoned that Benson was too careful a practitioner to overlook so important a detail.

With heart thumping violently, he climbed the broad wooden steps and inquired his way to the record room.

"May I see the marriage records of the last month?" he asked the clerk.

"You may not," came the reply, in positive voice.

"Why not?"

"Because it's against the rules."

"But they're public records," persisted Tile.

"That is true," admitted the clerk. "But the public is not permitted to see them except by order of the commissioner. If you have a valid

reason for wanting information about a specific marriage, you may give your reasons to the head of the department, and he may direct me to give you the desired information."

Tile left the office, disappointment written in his face. He was aware that it was impossible to take the commissioner into his confidence. In fact, he was ignorant of the name of one of the contracting parties to the marriage in which he was so deeply interested. If it should ever become necessary, he knew, as a result of his legal training, he could embody the circumstances of his marriage in an application to the court for a writ of mandamus, directing the head of the Health Department to give him access to the records. But he could conceive of no circumstance that could drive him to such a desperate move, if for no other reason than the notoriety that would inevitably follow it.

Fervently, he clung to the hope that the number of the motor-car would give him the desired clue to the identity of his wife. It was a short walk to the club; and when he got there, Carlton had not returned from his mission. But his impatience was soon forgotten in the absorption of

a note, in an unfamiliar handwriting, which he found in his letter-box.

The presentiment that the letter was from Miss Sinclair aroused such conflicting emotions that for five minutes he toyed with the envelope before opening it. He could not help the feeling that his fate, his happiness, were involved in the message. He cut the envelope with a penknife, unfolded the crested note-paper, and read:

"I hope no previous engagement will prevent your attendance at Mrs. Holt's reception to-morrow afternoon. I shall be there.

"ETHEL SINCLAIR."

A light, tender, yet apprehensive, leaped into his eyes. He read and re-read the message, studied the characteristics of the handwriting, pondered over her evident anxiety to see him. The doubts with which he regarded her could not stifle the pleasurable anticipations which the message aroused.

He was engrossed with the contents of the letter when Carlton's form loomed in the doorway.

"Did you learn anything?" he enquired anxiously.

"I did," came the calm response.

"Whose car was it?"

"Why, the mysterious car is owned by a famous lawyer—Benson."

CHAPTER V

THREE MILLION POUNDS

TILE linked Carlton's information to the inferences which he had drawn from the circumstances attaching to Ethel Sinclair's presence at the ball, and concluded that Benson's interest in her was not entirely disconnected from the marriage in the lawyer's office. In fact, he became conscious of a growing conviction that somehow the fate of the young woman was closely interwoven with his own.

"Is she my wife?" He asked it of himself in a tremulous undertone, then instantly rejected the affirmative answer that framed itself in his mind. But the rejection clashed with his calmer judgment. About her presence in the home of Mrs. Trask clustered a series of incidents that led him irresistibly to the conclusion that she was Mrs. Frederick Tile.

Nevertheless, he refused to accept the conclu-

sion as final. His mind rebelled at the thought that this young woman, with all her delicious feminine charms, could debase herself into participating in that empty, unholy ceremony in which he had played the part of bridegroom. For, despite the assurance he had received from Benson, he was convinced that only the menace of a colossal scandal could have induced the veiled bride to affix her signature to the marriage contract.

Moreover, he realised with a thrill of satisfaction, that it was by a process of reason based entirely on circumstances that might be no more than a series of singular coincidences, that he was led to the person of Ethel Sinclair as the woman's figure in the mystery. There were no staring, relentless facts to establish her conclusively as his wife. Circumstantial evidence pointed toward her, but with a slender, wavering finger, that might easily be made to swing in another direction. And, with all the fervour of a being enchanted, if not in love, he wanted that finger to swing.

But what if she were his wife? What course should he pursue if she were already united to

him in formal wedlock? All his finer instincts united in urging a single course. It stretched straight away from her, off into the obscure distance, beyond the growing influence of her compelling charm. The conditions of his contract necessitated it, caution demanded it, the safety of his remaining eighty thousand pounds depended on it. He could see clearly that her presence exerted an intoxicating influence on him, in which the desire to possess her swept all other considerations out of his mind.

Safety clearly lay in flight, but he could not bring himself to resolve to go. An invisible, unyielding leash held him within the radius of her disturbing influence. It was as if a subtle spell had been cast over him, which he was unable to shake off. And he submitted to it, reluctantly, with mild regret.

Already his active brain was filled with excuses for remaining in the city. By the exercise of a fair amount of discretion, he thought, he could move in her presence undaunted, even though she were his wife. He could dissemble as well as she. His placid soul craved no excitement, but would not shrink from it. If she was

playing a double game—well, he still would have something to say about the outcome of the game. And—most gratifying thought of all—there was the possibility that she was not his wife; that she was ignorant of the manner in which he had sold himself; that she regarded him with a tender favour born of gratitude.

Had Tile been less agitated and more discerning, he would have seen that curiosity and love were combining to lead him into adventure.

He was brought out of his contemplation of the absorbing puzzle that beset him, by a note, delivered by a uniformed messenger. Indifferently he tore open the envelope and scanned the contents of the letter. The next moment he was in possession of all his faculties, alert to his surroundings.

"No answer!" he shot at the waiting boy.

Tile hastily donned his coat and hat and left the club. Boarding a subway train, he was carried downtown, into the heart of the business section of the city. With quickening steps he made his way to Benson's office, where he was instantly ushered into the lawyer's private room.

"I see you responded immediately to my note," remarked Benson, running his fingers through a pile of documents.

"You requested my presence as soon as convenient, and it happened to be convenient to come at once," replied Tile.

"I sent for you," said Benson in response to the other's look of inquiry, "because I want you to acknowledge formally the conveyance of securities worth approximately three million pounds from your wife to you."

Tile leaned back in his seat, his tense muscles relaxed, an amazed expression on his face.

"What's the joke?" he asked.

"I am aware of no hidden joke in the transaction," Benson returned icily.

"You want me to accept securities worth three millions?" The smile on Tile's face extended to a broad grin. "Certainly. Hand them over!"

"Levity is entirely out of place in this matter." Benson tried to freeze him with a glance, but Tile's good nature expanded under the touch of the unexpected turn of events. In fact, he found it impossible to take the lawyer seriously.

"What have I done to deserve all this money?" he inquired. "But if you are not at liberty to give the information, don't disturb yourself about it," he added hastily. "I won't be squeamish about accepting the securities."

"They have already been conveyed to you——"

"Oh, very well, let me have them," interrupted Tile with assumed eagerness. "And you may convey my thanks to Mrs. Tile. Her generosity quite takes away my breath."

"Of course, you're not to have physical possession of the bonds," Benson enlightened him. "They will remain in my care. But you are to be their legal owner in case the necessity for claiming such ownership should arise."

"Then there's a string to the gift?" Tile had expected something of the sort.

"Yes. It is merely a formal transfer to safeguard them for the lady. Circumstances have arisen which make it necessary that you become their owner."

Tile remained thoughtful, pondering this strange transaction.

"Look here!" he exclaimed with some show of

alarm. "If there's anything crooked behind this, I'll not have anything to do with it! How do I know that she's the legal owner of the securities? How do I know that she has the legal right to transfer them? What assurance have I that they weren't stolen and that I'm not being used as a tool to hide the loot? I didn't think there was a theft behind the marriage——"

"There isn't," Benson broke in.

"Oh, I have only your word for it!" came the sneering retort. "I don't know the identity of my wife! I am pledged not to inquire into the motive for her singular marriage! But I do know that she was willing to buy me as a nominal husband for a hundred thousand pounds, and now she is thrusting three millions in securities on me! What the devil kind of a game am I involved in?"

"I understand your perturbation," Benson said soothingly. "But it is entirely uncalled for. You have nothing to fear."

"I have everything to fear," maintained Tile. "I've got to live five years of mystery and dread, and now you ask me to assume the ownership of securities—bonds, you say—the nature of which

I don't know. I scent trouble, and I'm not going to be involved any deeper than I am at present. I'll be hanged if I accept those securities!"

"Three millions!" Benson intoned impressively.

"Not for me!" Tile returned angrily. Then the humour of the situation burst on him, and he laughed aloud. "Refusing three millions!" he chuckled. "If I told it to anyone, he'd think I'm crazy."

Tile's laughter produced no responsive quiver of mirth in Benson. His face was set in grim seriousness, occasionally screwing itself into an impatient frown.

"Evidently you mistrust me?" he remarked.

"I mistrust the whole proposition, from beginning to end."

"Have you more faith in Miss Sinclair?" The words had an electrical effect on Tile. He bent forward in his chair, every nerve quivering.

"Perhaps!" He said it as if it cost him an effort to do so.

"I thought so." The lawyer indulged in an equivocal smile. "Kindly read this note."

Tile read the missive aloud:

"Please accept the securities which Mr. Benson will offer you. It is necessary, and will be appreciated by me. ETHEL SINCLAIR."

Benson had foreseen the young man's refusal and was prepared to overcome it. The conviction flashed through Tile that Miss Sinclair undoubtedly was in the game; he became aware of an increasing certainty that she was his wife. But he gave no utterance to his thoughts.

"I'll sign the acknowledgments," was all he said.

Benson extended three documents for the other's signature. They were simple conveyances from Mrs. Frederick Tile to Frederick Tile of a list of bonds, named on separate sheets of paper. These sheets Tile was not permitted to see.

"Does this in any way change or modify the conditions of the marriage contract?" Tile inquired after he had affixed his signature to the papers.

"Not in the least."

Tile rose to go, and as he did so, the door suddenly swung open, revealing one of the office

boys. For an instant the boy stood hesitating, then advanced and placed a card on Benson's desk. The lawyer glanced at it, and quickly turned it face down so as to hide the name. But the change of expression which accompanied the act did not escape Tile. He observed the look of tense anxiety which crept into the face of the lawyer and the surprised gleam in his eyes. With a formal nod, Tile walked out of the office, passing through the reception room on the way to the lift. He threw a quick glance of scrutiny at the single visitor, and received in return the impression of a strong, foreign countenance, with dark, snappy eyes, full lips and firm chin. It was a severe face, wearing an air of imperious command, as if its owner were used to being obeyed.

Tile wondered vaguely why the card of the visitor had broken through the customary imperturbability of Benson? Why the inscrutable face of the lawyer had suddenly been distorted by a look of grave concern? But he soon dismissed the subject from his mind, reverting, as ever, to his own tangled affairs. As if from long habit, his footsteps carried him insensibly to the Lawyers'

Club, the interior of which he had not seen for six weeks. In the big library he found Graham, an old friend, and dropped into a seat at his side. After a few commonplace remarks, he adroitly switched the conversation to a discussion of Benson's attainments as a lawyer.

"He's a pretty capable man?" remarked Tile.

"One of the shrewdest lawyers in the country," replied Graham. "Not so much in open court as an office lawyer, though. He has a wonderful foreign practice—represents half a dozen legations. And his office hums with more foreign intrigues than the Czar's palace."

"Intrigues?" echoed Tile, inquiringly.

"I should say so. Why, he represents millions of American capital invested abroad, and probably as much foreign capital invested in this country. And when there's anything afoot in any European country that may affect American money, it's a safe wager that Benson has a hand in it."

"Queer fellow, isn't he?"

"I don't know much about him personally, but Rogers, who used to be a clerk in his office, tells me there are almost as many state secrets filed

away in Benson's big vault as in the office of the Secretary of State."

"It must be a mighty interesting practice," commented Tile. "Evidently he is trusted implicitly by the big people?"

"No secret has ever been known to leak out of his office," replied Graham.

Half an hour later, Tile joined Carlton at the Cosmos Club.

CHAPTER VI

THE MYSTERIOUS CAB

"You have occupied my thoughts." Tile spoke in a soft, almost caressing voice. "I might even say your vision has haunted me ever since we met."

Miss Sinclair flushed at his frank avowal, then eyed him reproachfully. "Perhaps I am being misled by my intuition," she replied; "but there is something on your mind—something that is weighing heavily on it, something that you want to say to me. But you haven't the courage."

He levelled his gaze, eyeing her steadily, studying the expression of her face. He wondered whether she might be preparing a pitfall.

"Yes, there is something on my mind," he admitted; "but there also is something on yours—some secret which you do not care to reveal."

She stifled a rising gasp of alarm, but with

such perceptible effort that his suspicions resolved themselves into certainty.

They were in a secluded corner of Mrs. Holt's big drawing-room. The place was alive with men and women, and the buzz of conversation made it necessary for the couple to pitch their voices to a higher level. Tile moved his chair closer to his companion, so that the wooden elbows touched. He bent toward her, his features set, his nerves keyed close to the snapping point.

"You appeared eager to avoid me this afternoon—why?" he suddenly said.

"Not in the least," she replied with a forced smile.

"It seemed so to me." His inward excitement was reflected in his speech.

"Why should I avoid you?" she inquired wistfully, meeting his gaze. "I have reasons for feeling entirely grateful."

As he moved closer to her, he became conscious again of the subtle spell she wove about him. His heart throbbed violently, his senses were afire. He could have seized her in his arms and avowed his love then and there. Had they been alone, his restraint would have snapped. The

ardour of his newly kindled love had melted the protecting armour of caution, leaving only a sense of constraint produced by the presence of so many other guests.

"I signed the papers in Benson's office," he said tremulously.

"That was very kind of you." She said it so earnestly, so artlessly, in a tone so vibrant with sincerity, that he could no longer check the question which had hung heavy on his lips from the moment he had set eyes on her that afternoon.

"Will you answer one question frankly?" he asked.

The note of desperation in his voice frightened her. She edged towards the farther side of her chair, as though to avoid the pressing inquiry.

Tile observed her emotions, and did not wait for her reply. He made the desperate plunge, fully conscious of the consequences it entailed.

"Miss Sinclair," he gasped, "are you married?"

The inquiry had the effect of a thunderbolt hurled suddenly at her feet. She arose abruptly, anger and confusion in her face, her eyes darting

points of fire. For a moment, she stood looking down at him; then she walked scornfully away.

He hurried after her; but she had taken the arm of the same sallow-faced foreigner whose eyes had challenged him in Benson's office, whose presence had disturbed him at Mrs. Trask's affair, and whose impassive countenance seemed to have thrust itself purposely between him and the woman he now believed to be his wife.

Further opportunity to force the issue was denied Tile that afternoon. Miss Sinclair clung to the arm of the foreigner, seemingly engrossed in conversation, whenever the young man approached.

After leaving the reception, Tile walked about aimlessly for hours, the tumult of his brain rendering him impervious to all outward impressions. He avoided the more crowded streets, keeping sedulously to the side ones. He walked swiftly, running at times; but he moved without sense of direction, without thought of destination. He kept on going, simply in response to the driving emotions which necessitated an outlet in the form of energy. Had he stood still, he would have fallen from dizziness.

His mind seemed to have lost its capability for connected thought. The incidents of the reception repeated themselves, but in a disconcerted, fragmentary way. He saw them as one viewing distant objects through ever shifting clouds. And, through it all, he had the sensation of one standing in the way of an approaching calamity.

The nature of the danger he could not discern, although its premonitory symptoms were unmistakable. Nor could he judge whether the vague feeling of menace referred to something within or without. Did it arise from the furnace breaths of passion that were consuming him, or was it a strange forewarning of an external peril?

Of only one thing did he feel assured. It had occurred to him at the moment when the first glance of mutual recognition passed between him and Miss Sinclair at the reception. The curt nod of her head, her singular aloofness, her constrained manner, her efforts to avoid him, all indicated a revulsion of feeling since she had sent the note bidding him to come. But in the few, agitated moments when they were alone, she had succeeded in dispelling this belief. It had seemed to him that she was enveloped in an

atmosphere of foreboding, that something weighed heavily on her mind, but that she had retained for him a regard not entirely born of gratitude. And in that belief he had hurled the destructive question that had repelled her like a deliberate insult.

Gradually Tile's mind ceased to swim and began to gather the impressions of his immediate surroundings. He consulted his watch and realised with a start that he had been walking four hours. Luckily he had been wandering in a narrowing circle, so that he was at no great distance from his club. He headed for there, possessed of a healthy appetite and a growing sense of impending trouble. The former he resolved to satisfy at once, the latter he endeavoured to dismiss as a silly delusion. At the door of the club the boy handed him a card, on which was engraved:

"Monsieur Jean de Sevier."

Instantly, the calamitous foreboding he had felt came on him with renewed force. He knew the owner of the name; it was the foreigner who had escorted Miss Sinclair to the reception.

Tile entered the sitting-room, where he joined the visitor.

Monsieur Sevier arose, extended a gloved hand, and after looking furtively about the room and assuring himself that no one else was present, motioned Tile to a seat in the corner of a window. The two men faced each other, Tile with a puzzled expression, the other with a countenace as unruffled as though chiselled in marble.

"Mr. Tile," said the unwelcome guest, in a voice as expressionless as his face, "you must leave the city at once."

The request seemed to amuse Tile. "Why?" he demanded lightly.

"Because you are in great danger," the other informed him. "You have jeopardised your life."

Tile betrayed no anxiety. He looked into the impenetrable eyes of the foreigner, as though he expected to find in them a menacing glint. But they were as coldly indifferent as the gaze of a well-trained butler.

"When I entered into the marriage to which

you were a witness, I was not informed that I was staking my life," he said.

"There was no danger of any kind at the time," replied Sevier. "But something unforeseen has happened, and you will be killed at the first opportunity."

"I shall be careful that no such opportunity presents itself," declared Tile.

"Then they will make the opportunity," said the other.

"Whom do you mean by 'they'?"

"I am not at liberty to tell."

"But I have a right to know. I have the right to protect myself."

"It will be sufficient protection if you leave the city."

"So, that's the game!" sneered Tile. "It is simply a ruse to prevent my meeting Miss Sinclair again."

"It is not a ruse," replied Sevier. "The danger of which I speak is imminent."

"How imminent?"

Sevier waited an instant before replying: "It is sufficiently close to necessitate Miss Sinclair's departure also."

"Then she is——" Tile broke off abruptly, realising he was on dangerous ground. But the eager, challenging note in his voice had not escaped the visitor.

"She is *not* your wife," Sevier said slowly, emphasising each word, as if he meant to carve the sentence on the other's consciousness.

Tile's face lit with an expression of delight. It was as if his brain had been cleared suddenly of a delusion which had long obscured it. The welcome knowledge that she was above the sordid marriage in which he had participated, that she was not a partner in the coarse transaction, came like a cooling breeze to relieve his fevered senses. He could now lift her to the pedestal which he wanted her to occupy; he could regard her without fear that behind her alluring image lurked a hideous scandal.

"Does she know of my marriage?" he asked, in a sudden access of alarm.

"I answered one question," replied Sevier, "in order to eliminate the false impression that seemed to disturb you. You must not ask me further about her."

Tile's eyes searched the impassive face of the

visitor; he found it a stone mask, effectually hiding every motion in a cold, piercing stare. It occurred to him that, perhaps, Sevier was simply leading him on; that he was lying to carry out some hidden purpose of his own. The thought put Tile on his guard.

"You say Miss Sinclair is in danger?" Tile asked.

"That is correct."

"Will she leave the city also?"

"That I cannot tell."

"Does she want me to go?" Tile's eyes bent eagerly on the visitor.

"She does," came the curt reply.

Tile settled back in deep reflection; the lines of his forehead gathered between his eyebrows, his lips twitched uneasily. "Did she send you to warn me?"

Sevier nodded assent. "She is most anxious that you should leave at once," he asserted.

"Tell her"—Tile's jaws closed with a determined snap—"tell her that I will remain right here. Furthermore, you may inform her that I will take steps to protect her, as well as myself."

Sevier's imperturbability gave way to an ex-

pression of deep concern, as though a great fear had been kindled within him.

"You must go," he urged, "for her sake, as well as your own." He moved forward until his knees pressed against Tile's. "Fate has played us a strange trick," he said. "We did not anticipate, at the time of the marriage, that you and Miss Sinclair would meet. We could not foresee that you would be a guest at the home of Mrs. Trask. It was unfortunate," he moaned, "that you were the man who saved Miss Sinclair's life."

"Why?" demanded Tile.

"Please don't ask me," pleaded the other. "I wouldn't have come to you, if the circumstances were not of the most pressing kind. I tell you, your life is in great danger, and that hers is equally menaced. We cannot tell what may happen. You may get away safely to-day; it may be too late to-morrow."

Tile beamed with inward satisfaction. "I am just at the point," he said, "where I think I'll enjoy a little trouble. I want to be of further service to Miss Sinclair——"

"Then leave the city at once," advised Sevier.

"Look here!" flashed Tile. "No such message as you bring can frighten me. But I'll go if Miss Sinclair personally asks me to go."

The condition was accepted reluctantly. "If there is no other way to make you go," sighed Sevier, "I will ring you up in half an hour, and let you know where to meet the young woman."

Tile watched the other's retreating form until the front door closed behind it. Then he bounded into the smoking room, and threw himself into a chair beside Carlton.

"It's getting warm!" he said excitedly. "The mystery is getting thicker. I've just been informed that my life's in danger, and I must leave the city."

"Hooray!" cheered Carlton. "Perhaps you'll let me in on the deal, now."

"Perhaps later in the day," promised Tile. "I'm to meet Miss Sinclair in half an hour——"

"Then she is part of the mystery?" Carlton broke in.

"She is," admitted the other readily. "And her life is in danger, too. I anticipate a lot of excitement ahead. You know, Carlton, I've always lived a sort of quiet, humdrum existence.

I've never cared much for adventure. But I'm warming up to it, now. In fact, I'm eager for it."

The conversation was interrupted by a page boy, who brought a letter. "A messenger boy left it," said the club employee. "There's no answer."

Tile tore open the envelope, and scanned the missive. His face dropped, as though he had heard unexpected news of a great bereavement. The note, which bore the heading of the Empire Trust Company, was brief and to the point. It said:

"Within the last twenty-four hours you committed a second breach of the contract entered into between you and Mr. Benson. We have been instructed to reduce by twenty thousand pounds the trust fund created in your behalf. We beg to inform you that the amount of the fund is now sixty thousand pounds."

Tile crushed the missive in his palm, then tore it into small fragments. He paused as he was about to drop them into a waste-paper basket, and,

throwing open a window, cast them into the street.

"What's the matter?" asked Carlton, puzzled by his friend's perturbation. "You haven't lost your legacy, have you?"

"No, but the blamed thing is dwindling steadily," replied Tile, in grieved accents. "However, I'll see it through if I go broke."

"More mystery?" Carlton mused aloud.

"Yes—and more to come," answered Tile savagely. He dropped into a chair, trying to gather his thoughts.

"I wonder what did it?" he asked himself. "Was it the break I made to her this afternoon? It couldn't have been that; for the trust company's letter must have been written at least half an hour before she left the reception, and she had no opportunity to telephone from Mrs. Holt's house. Was it my visit to the Health Department, or was it——"

He broke the train of his thoughts, his eyes narrowing suspiciously on his friend.

"Carlton," he asked, "have you told a single person about your visit to the Automobile Club, and who inspired it?"

"Not a soul, except you," replied Jimmy.

"You are absolutely sure of that?"

"Absolutely certain. Why?" he asked.

Tile stared vacantly into the distance, as though he expected it to yield a solution to the puzzle which was engaging his mind.

"Why did you put that question?" persisted Carlton.

"Oh, I simply wondered."

"You don't think I'd go about bellowing out your secrets, do you?" Carlton was aggrieved at this apparent accusation.

"No, but I thought you might have said something inadvertently."

"Well, I haven't."

Tile's perplexity grew deeper. He had known Carlton too long to believe him capable of a mean or underhand act, and he accepted his word without qualification. It was plain, therefore, that either Benson had learned of his visit to the Health Department, or Miss Sinclair had found a quick means of communicating with the lawyer.

It was not the loss of the money that upset his mind, so much as the knowledge that he was

in the grip of hidden forces, which he could not control.

"A gentleman wishes to speak to you on the telephone," a diminutive page informed him; and he hastened to the box.

It was Sevier—he knew the voice even before its possessor announced his identity.

"Miss Sinclair will see you at ten o'clock this evening," said the emissary. "She will be in the carriage in which you first saw her, at Central Park and Fifty-ninth Street. The door of the carriage will open when you arrive, and you will please step inside. After speaking with her, you will probably want to leave the city at once. So, kindly make arrangements for an immediate departure."

Tile discerned trickery in the appointment. Also, he scented danger, without knowing what form it would take. The fact that Sevier had been to the club to warn him, did not lessen his distrust of the foreigner.

Nevertheless, he determined to be on hand at the appointed hour. He did not confide his suspicions to Carlton, nor did he inform his friend of the message he had received over the telephone.

He deemed it best to keep his own counsel, resolved to meet the young woman alone.

The hours until ten o'clock seemed to drag, as though restrained by ball and chain. Toward evening clouds began to gather, and a thin snow powder hung silvery in the sky. It descended gently, in soft flakes; and when Tile reached the park approach, the surrounding buildings, and the broad stretch of trees and shrubbery had taken on a fantastic aspect, suggestive of a fairyland scene.

At the corner he perceived through the floating veil of white the dim outline of a cab. Its form grew more compact as he drew nearer, until it seemed to stand like a frozen bulk in the snow-spangled night. A lone arc lamp sent shivery shafts of light against the glistening coating of the vehicle, giving it the sheen of highly polished silver.

Erect on the seat, reins in hand, whip poised, sat a white effigy in top hat. He seemed frozen to the place, yet there was something alert in his pose, like that of a man ready for a great emergency.

Tile approached the cab slowly, his mind

filled with a vague fear, his eyes wandering furtively up and down the thoroughfare. Had he been able to see his own reflection, he could not have helped laughing at the grotesque figure he made. He appeared to be a snow man, ready to spring on any shadow that might cross his path.

He stopped abruptly in front of the carriage, looking up inquiringly at the driver. The man drew the reins tighter, but vouchsafed no responsive glance.

Although certain that the carriage was the one he had come to meet, Tile did not venture to question the driver. There was a bare possibility that the man was waiting for someone in the hotel across the way, and he did not care to arouse the curiosity of a stranger. He was about to move away, when the carriage door swung open and a woman's hand motioned him within.

Something in his consciousness urged him to refuse the silent invitation, but the sight of the feminine hand, which now was motioning desperately, reassured him. Shaking the snow off his coat, he stepped briskly into the vehicle, clicking the door behind him. As he dropped into a corner of the seat, the driver whipped up

the horse, and the carriage swung into the park.

"Miss Sinclair?" said Tile inquiringly.

For the first time, he observed that the shades were drawn, and that he was in an impenetrable gloom, through which he was unable to discern the figure of his companion.

At sound of his voice, the woman moved close to him, pressing her form against his heavy, fur-lined coat.

Tile waited through several anxious moments for a response, but none came. He became alarmedly aware, however, of a hand brushing his pockets, as though searching for something. He seized the inquisitive wrist in a grip which brought an exclamation of pain from its owner.

"What does this mean?" demanded Tile.

"Please take your hand off my wrist," a woman's voice replied.

Tile thrust the hand from him, and, as he did so, he felt something hard pressing against his side. Looking down, his eyes met the glint of a revolver, its muzzle thrust into a fold of his coat.

"Miss Sinclair!" he gasped again.

"I'm not Miss Sinclair," was the calm reply. "And you are a prisoner," the voice added.

His hand made for the door knob; and, after much groping, he found it. But it would not turn to his hardest twists.

"The doors are locked," the woman's voice informed him. "It is useless to try to open them. There are also heavy shutters beneath the shades, so that it will be futile to try to smash the windows with your elbow. And if you struggle, I shall be compelled to shoot."

Tile sank back in his seat, uncertain whether he should resent the calm assurance of his companion by overpowering her, or pretend to regard himself as entirely at her mercy. Somehow, he could not make himself believe that he was in danger from the revolver she held.

"I half expected a trick," he ventured finally.

"Therefore we were doubly prepared for trouble," the woman replied. Her English was perfect, but she was unable to hide traces of a foreign accent in her pronunciation. Tile decided that she was a French woman, or an

American woman who had been brought up in France.

"Where am I going?" he asked.

"To a most secluded spot." She shifted the revolver, so as to support her hand by pressing her elbow against the cushioned back of the carriage. "You will be perfectly safe, so long as you offer no resistance. We are taking you away for your own good."

"Kidnapped as a favour!" He laughed.

"You take it too lightly," she returned angrily. "This is a serious matter."

"It will be when I get away," he agreed. "The police may be interested in this case."

"The police will never hear of it." It was plain that the possible consequences of abduction did not alarm her.

"What makes you so confident of that?" he asked.

"The knowledge that you will never dare to inform them."

"You feel very certain of that?"

"I should not be here now, if I were not absolutely certain."

His eyes slowly accustomed themselves to the

darkness, and he tried to make out her figure. Its lines were hidden beneath a heavy black cloak; but her gracefully slender hands, and the curve of the outer garment, suggested a woman of striking build. Her features were protected by a thick veil, drawn back and tied beneath the chin.

"How long am I to remain a prisoner?"

"As long as we choose to keep you."

"Then I am to be subjected to the discomfort——"

"You will be subjected to no discomforts," she interrupted. "Everything possible will be done to serve your convenience—that is, if it does not inconvenience us."

"By 'us,' I presume you mean the glib Mr. Sevier and the crafty Mr. Benson?" he said.

"Mr. Sevier and Mr. Benson are secondary considerations. I am concerned about another personage, much more important than they. To protect that person, it is necessary to protect you."

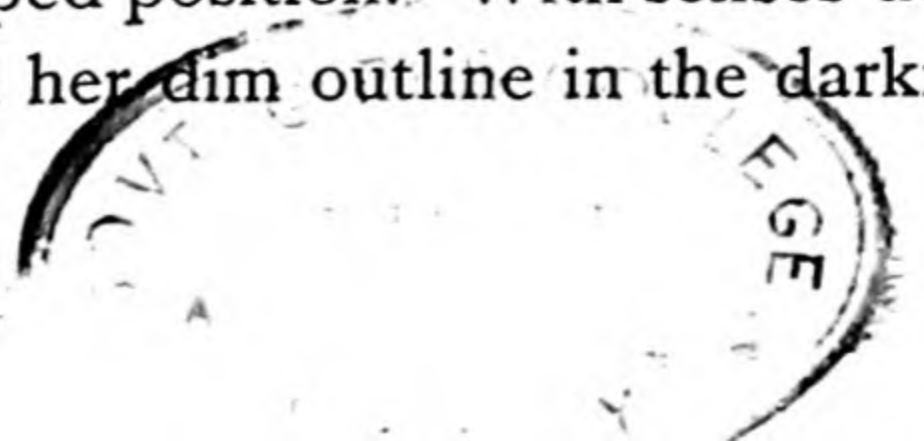
"Which is all very mysterious," he commented.

"Yes, very mysterious, indeed," she acquiesced.

The woman lapsed into silence, out of which Tile found it impossible to lure her. The carriage rolled on at a steady pace, but the prisoner was unable to judge its direction. No sound came to him, save the muffled clatter of the horse's hoofs and the crunching of the snow beneath the wheels.

Several times he was tempted to break the oppressive stillness by a chance scream for help; but his impulse was checked by the realisation that the cry would probably not penetrate the thick sides of the carriage. He huddled into the corner of the seat, outwardly submissive, inwardly aflame with resentment. Carefully, he avoided all moves that might arouse his captor's suspicions, calculating that before long her vigilance must relax sufficiently to enable him to turn the tables.

He was not wrong. The tremor of her arm was a message that the hand in which she held the revolver would soon succumb to the fatigue of its cramped position. With senses doubly alert, he watched her dim outline in the darkness. Her



left hand was moving cautiously towards the right, as if to relieve it of the weapon. He saw her fingers close over the gleaming barrel of the revolver; and in the instant in which she sought to shift it from one hand to the other, his own hand wrenched it out of her grasp.

"I'd hate to kill a woman," he said, in a subdued voice; "but if it's a question of your life or mine, I'll sacrifice yours."

She gave a sharp gasp as she felt the steel rim of the weapon pressing against her side. Recovering her composure, she leaned languorously back in her seat, stretching her limbs until the tips of her shoes touched the upturned seat at the front of the carriage.

The click of a button was audible, and, as though in response to the sound, four electric bulbs, hidden in the angles of the walls, illumined the carriage with their liquid glow.

Tile's eyes smarted under the effect of the sudden illumination, and his eyelids dropped in a vain effort to shut out the sudden onrush of light.

The woman bent forward suddenly, both hands clutching desperately at the revolver. Into the

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effort to wrest it from him she threw all the energy of despair, but the struggle was useless.

Tile overpowered her easily, and, banging down the opposite seat, forced her into it.

"Now," he said, "let's get better acquainted."

Almost before she was aware of his intention, he had torn the veil from her face.

With the unveiling, her demeanour underwent an immediate change. The tigerish ferocity with which she had sought to regain possession of the revolver gave way to a look of resignation, as though she had expended all her strength in the one desperate struggle. This woman, who had talked of murder with the cool indifference which she might have applied to the purchase of a new bonnet, was now plainly on the verge of tears.

Her features, soft and refined, bore unmistakable traces of suffering. Wisps of dark brown hair showed beneath the turban hat that crowned her well-shaped head. There was nothing hard or cruel in the lines of her mouth; nor could Tile find in that almost docile face the least trace of the outlaw's disregard of human life, which she had displayed a few brief minutes before.

As he contemplated her, he was almost tempted to hide the revolver in his pocket, so meek and mild did she appear.

"You don't look like a bold kidnapper," he observed.

"Nor like the desperate villain of a melodrama," she returned.

"No—one wouldn't take you for a woman who would engage in a thrilling cab ride, such as this."

"But if you only knew the circumstances——" She broke off abruptly, as if fearful of committing an indiscretion of speech.

The lurching of the carriage, as the wheels bounded across the tram lines, brought Tile back to the realisation that, although he was master of the situation within the carriage, he was no less a prisoner than he had been.

"Let me have the key of that door," he said.

"How do you know I have it?" she asked.

"You certainly provided yourself with the means of getting out of here," he replied. "If you don't hand over the key, I shall be compelled to search you for it."

The unwavering determination of his tone

showed her the uselessness of further parleying. Her agitated fingers groped in the pocket of her coat, and produced the desired key.

Tile took it, unlocked the door, and opened it slightly, permitting a gust of snow-laden air to sweep the interior of the carriage.

"It looked like a carefully planned job, this kidnapping," he commented. "But it was crude work—the crudest kind of work."

He swung the door ajar, and placed one foot on the step, bending his body forward until it protruded halfway out of the cab.

"Halt!" he commanded.

Either the driver did not hear him, or he deliberately ignored the call, for he made no effort to check the pace of the animal. Tile observed that they were passing through a fairly well-populated section of the city, probably somewhere in the Bronx.

"Stop the horse!" he shouted, but the animal continued steadily in its stride.

Tile was about to essay a dangerous climb to the driver's seat, when he felt a restraining hand on his elbow. The woman was trying to drag him back into the carriage.

The young man acted quickly. Pointing the revolver skyward, he pulled the trigger several times in rapid succession.

The shots startled the driver out of his preoccupation; he stopped the horse with a sharp tug at the reins. As the carriage came to a halt, the sound of many voices reached Tile's ears.

"What's the matter?" the driver called from his seat.

Tile sprang to the street, and levelled the revolver at the man with the reins. "You come down here!" he ordered.

The driver climbed cumbersomely from his perch. The snow was inches thick on his garments, and the lower part of his face was shielded by his upturned collar. His feet had barely touched the street when the approaching voices swelled into a chorus, above which were heard the shrill notes of policemen's whistles. Before Tile could question the driver, he was surrounded by a dozen bluecoats.

"What's the trouble?" one of the policemen demanded. Seeing the revolver in Tile's hand, he promptly seized the young man's elbow. "Hand over that gun!" he ordered.

Tile gave up the weapon, without protest. "Take us to the police station," he said. "There's a woman in the carriage—take her, too. They tried to kidnap me."

It suddenly occurred to him that the lights in the cab had been extinguished. He made a step forward, but was restrained by three policemen, who bulked themselves between him and the vehicle. The door was shut, and one of the bluecoats turned the knob.

"It's locked," he announced.

"If she's in the carriage, she might as well stay there," another policeman suggested. "The station's only a block away. Come on—let's start."

The horse was turned round by one of the bluecoats, and led in the direction of the police station. Tile and the driver, flanked by other guardians of the peace, made for the same destination.

On the steps of the station, the presence of the many policemen was explained. The midnight shift of platoons had taken place, and the men of the incoming platoon were lined before the lieutenant's desk. They were dismissed hastily when the two men were brought in.

"This gentleman here says he's been kidnapped," one of the policemen informed. "He says there's a lady in the carriage outside."

"Well, bring her in," directed the lieutenant.

"She's locked herself in," spoke up another bluecoat.

"Break open the door," ordered the lieutenant.

"That isn't necessary," interjected Tile. "Here's the key."

A policeman hastened outside, but returned in a few moments, a puzzled expression on his face.

"She's gone," he said.

"Are you sure there was a woman in the carriage?" questioned the lieutenant.

"I certainly am," replied Tile. "I took the revolver from her, and forced her to surrender the key." He described her appearance, and half a dozen men were ordered to go out and search for her.

"Now for the prisoner!" observed the lieutenant. "Driver, lower that coat collar, so that I can get a look at your face."

The driver obeyed.

At sight of his features, Tile uttered an exclamation of surprise. "Sevier!" he shouted.

The abductor's face gave not the slightest sign of recognition. He marched boldly up to the rail, and faced the lieutenant.

"The gentleman is mistaken," he said. "He was not being abducted."

"Anything you may say will be used against you," the lieutenant cautioned him. "Now, what's your name?"

Sevier disregarded the question. From his coat pocket he took a folded sheet of paper, which he passed to the man behind the desk.

The lieutenant read it with increasing amazement. When he had finished, he returned the mysterious sheet to Sevier. Bending forward, he pressed a button, sounding a bell in the back room.

A uniformed doorkeeper answered the summons.

"Help the officer escort this gentleman to the carriage outside," ordered the lieutenant, pointing to Tile.

"What does this mean?" demanded Tile furiously.

"Now, you go along quietly," cautioned the lieutenant. "If you don't, we'll put the nippers on you."

"I protest!" shouted Tile. "I am a lawyer, and I want to know what this means? I have lodged an accusation against this driver, and I demand that he be held."

"Say!" the lieutenant fired back. "Don't make any more trouble for this man. You're going with him, and that's all there's to it. Officer"—he turned toward the policeman—"lock this man in the carriage."

Dazed by the sudden turn of events, Tile was led to the carriage, thrust into the dark compartment, and locked securely within. Before he recovered from his surprise, the horse had started off.

CHAPTER VII

ENFORCED CAPTIVITY

TILE kicked viciously against the sides of the carriage, but a thick leather padding deadened the noise of the impact. Taking a penknife from his pocket, he ripped open the leather, only to find a protection of metal plate. Next he beat furiously against the shutters, scraping his knuckles against the iron surface.

The conveyance, it was plain, had been built to withstand rupture from within.

The only ventilation came through tiny holes in the roof, but it was doubtful whether his loudest cries could penetrate the apertures in sufficient volume to be heard by any passer-by. Besides, it was past midnight and snowing; and few persons were without.

The carriage rolled on for an interminable length of time, as it seemed to the prisoner. It

was evident to Tile that he was being taken somewhere in the outskirts of the city, there to be held until his captors should be ready to release him.

Amazing precautions had been taken to prevent his escape, but most puzzling of all was the strange conduct of the police lieutenant. Tile wondered as to the contents of the paper which had enlisted the aid of the police so promptly, and so effectually. It seemed incredible that such an occurrence could have taken place in New York. Yet, here he was, securely locked in the metal-walled vehicle, the living proof of its reality.

Occasionally, the face of Miss Sinclair thrust itself into his thoughts. Was she a partner in this criminal enterprise? The facts seemed to point that way, yet he tried hard to make himself believe otherwise.

He was trying to gather in orderly array before his mind the crowded incidents of the weeks since his marriage, when the carriage stopped, and a key grated in the lock.

The door swung open, and Tile jumped out, landing in the embrace of the driver.

"It is useless to try to escape," whispered Sevier.

Tile observed the stocky forms of two other men close to his elbow. In the reflected whiteness of the snow, their faces loomed sufficiently plain for him to make out their features. Dark complexioned, clean shaven, with full lips, and large brown eyes, they presented a similarity of type which stamped them as of one nationality. Tile judged that they were Frenchmen—or, possibly, Austrians.

"Come this way," commanded Sevier.

The prisoner took a quick survey of his surroundings. The white desolation about him was broken by several clusters of trees, which screened a large, square frame building. No other habitation was in sight.

On either side of the thoroughfare, at regular intervals, arc lamps hung suspended from high poles. Tile guessed that he was in the outskirts of the big city, but on one of the main roads of travel.

"That's encouraging, at least," he mused.

He felt Sevier's arm link itself to his; and he accompanied the Frenchman along a narrow,

tortuous path, past the group of trees, to the broad steps of the house. The shades were drawn, but illumined, as if the house had been brilliantly lit in anticipation of his coming. Without protest, he permitted himself to be led to the door, which apparently had been left open by the two men who had met the carriage.

"You will find it pleasant and warm inside," commented Sevier.

Tile did not reply. He followed his abductor into a wide drawing-room, furnished in somewhat old-fashioned style, with huge portraits in massive gilt frames suspended on the walls, rigid-backed chairs of antique pattern scattered about, and the floor covered by big rugs, which overlapped each other. Three giant logs crackled in the wide fireplace.

"We have had to prepare somewhat hastily for your reception," said Sevier, smiling blandly at his prisoner, "but we did the best we could. It was fortunate that we rented this house several weeks ago, in preparation for just such an emergency as occurred to-day."

Tile eyed his captor with undisguised repugnance. "You used the name of a lady to lure me

into the carriage," he said, indicating the trend of his thoughts. "I warn you that swift retribution will follow my escape from here."

"If you were aware of all the circumstances," replied Sevier, moving a chair close to the fireplace, "you would not be so bitter."

Tile, also, moved within the warmth of the burning logs. "What I'd like to know," he blurted, "is whether Miss Sinclair is a willing accomplice in this abduction, or whether the use of her name was a presumption on your part?"

Sevier's eyes wandered from the logs to the wrathful countenance of his involuntary guest.

"The lady will answer that question herself," he declared.

"And where am I to find her?" Tile's face lit up in eagerness.

"In this house," came the calm response.

Tile's surprised stare rebounded from the other's inscrutable countenance, and diffused itself about the room, as though he expected to find the young woman hidden in one of the angles of the walls.

"She is here?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes," replied Sevier.

"Is she, also, a prisoner?"

"In a way—yes."

A dark flush suffused Tile's face, but the anger that induced it was only momentary. To be under the same roof with her, to experience the charm of her presence, to bask again in the sunshine of her personality, filled him with a pleasant anticipation which did not go unobserved by Sevier. It thrilled him to know that she, also, was a captive, and instantly the vague plans of escape which hovered in his mind, were extended to include her.

"Was she brought here against her will?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, no!" Sevier smiled. "She came willingly—in fact, she was most anxious to come."

"But you said she was a prisoner?"

"I said she was a prisoner—in a way. You see, the danger that threatened you, menaced her also. So it became necessary for both of you to seclude yourselves."

Tile's brow knitted in perplexity. "We were strangers to each other until recently," he said. "In what possible way can my fate be involved with hers?"

Sevier fixed his eyes on the questioner, chilling him with their cold glint. "I am not here to answer questions," he said. "I am here to protect you."

"To protect me!" cried Tile, with rising inflection.

"And Miss Sinclair," added Sevier, in an even voice.

The enigmatic response served its intended purpose. Tile felt an uneasy curiosity which he did not dare to express. His previous inquisitiveness had proved costly, and he did not care to risk another reduction of his marriage settlement. He was aware that his abduction, and Miss Sinclair's voluntary seclusion, had to do with his marriage; but the inspiring motive of the singular incidents which had followed his meeting with the young woman on the day of the Trask reception was, as yet, unrevealed.

It is easier, however, to conspire with circumstances than against them; so Tile decided to fall in line, if possible, with Sevier's plans.

"Don't you think that a frank explanation of your conduct, and of the conduct of those

involved with you in this peculiar case, would clear the atmosphere?" he asked.

"The explanation can never be made," returned Sevier.

"Don't you think it might avoid trouble?"

"What trouble?"

"Such trouble as I might make."

"We anticipate no trouble from you," declared Sevier.

The swish of skirts sounded pleasantly in the corridor. Tile turned, in a fever of expectancy, his frame throbbing with the tumult of conflicting emotions.

Framed in the doorway stood the gracefully erect figure of Miss Sinclair.

The two men arose, as though released by the same spring.

"Come in," invited Sevier, in a deferential tone. "You see, Mr. Tile is with us."

As Miss Sinclair stepped forward, she brought a fragrant freshness into the big sitting-room. Her form was enveloped in a loose heliotrope-coloured gown, every line of which fell in gentle curves, seeming to merge with the alluring softness of the draperies.

Tile's eyes wandered up and down her figure, as though enchanted by the vision. Miss Sinclair's mere presence inspired in him an abiding confidence in her integrity of purpose; he surrendered unqualifiedly to her charms.

"Since you are here, I am content to remain indefinitely," he said, by way of greeting.

A shade flitted across her face, obscuring for a moment its artlessly frank aspect. "I am glad you are safe," she said, extending her hand. "I was nervous and apprehensive until I heard the carriage roll up to the kerb."

Not the words, but the expression which accompanied them, inspired Tile with the belief that her interest in him transcended the immediate purpose of his abduction.

"Had you asked me to come here and remain indefinitely, I should have been most happy to do so," he declared. "It would have been unnecessary to kidnap me."

Sevier drew a chair to the fireplace, and the three seated themselves before the burning logs.

"I was afraid," said Miss Sinclair, in answer to Tile's reproach, "you might distrust me. I feared my word would have no weight with you

—that you might refuse to come. You see, we hardly know each other."

"I know you well enough to trust you implicitly," he responded gallantly.

Her eyes lit in appreciation of his confidence; the beaming countenance which she turned on him seemed to have taken on additional charm, and she was about to speak when Sevier broke in:

"There are certain little details, Mr. Tile, that will have to be attended to. Before discussing them, however, I suggest that Miss Sinclair, in whom you have faith, explain the situation with regard to your presence in this house."

Tile turned an inquiring glance on the girl, his senses alert to the revelations which she was asked to make.

"The situation is just this," she informed him. "This house is thoroughly guarded, from within, as well as from without. The utmost vigilance will be maintained—for a double purpose. Every precaution has been taken to prevent your leaving here, but the guards will be even more watchful to prevent the intrusion of persons whose presence in this city is a menace to our lives."

"*Our* lives!" repeated Tile. A tender light shone pleasantly in his eyes. "I'll remain here to protect you."

"And you will do as I ask, no matter how strange the request may seem?" The note of appeal in her voice awakened a responsive echo in him.

"I will," he answered.

"Then there is nothing further for me to say."

He was sorry that he had consented so readily. Had he pretended to doubt her, he felt, she might have enlightened him further regarding their common danger. But it was too late to retrieve his mistake without offending her; so he swallowed his disappointment, with outward indifference.

"And now, Mr. Tile," remarked Sevier, "there are one or two details you undoubtedly will want to arrange, before settling into a long seclusion from your friends. You recall that I asked you to prepare for a trip out of the city. Did you make the necessary preparations?"

"I did," replied Tile. "I have two suit cases packed at the club."

"Good!" commented Sevier. "If you will

give me a written order, I will have them brought to you."

"I'll write the order willingly," assented Tile.

"As you may not visit the club for a long time," continued Sevier, "some of your friends may become suspicious of your absence. Is there any one who might institute a search for you?"

Tile instantly thought of Carlton. "There is," he responded.

"Who?"

"Mr. Carlton. He lives at the club."

"Will you write him a note, saying you have been called suddenly out of the city, and directing him to address all communications to you care of Mr. Benson?"

"Will the letters be handed over to me unopened?"

"They will," came the ready response.

"Then I'll do as you ask."

"It is late," remarked Sevier, looking at his watch, "and I guess we are all tired."

Miss Sinclair arose, at the hint, and extended her hand to Tile. "Good night," she said, with a winning smile.

His hand lingered in hers, and he observed

that she did not recoil from its warm pressure. He escorted her to the door, and watched her until she disappeared around the bend at the head of the stairs.

"Come—I will show you to your room," Sevier's voice grated on him disconcertingly.

He turned abruptly, to encounter the ironic smile with which the speaker regarded him, and, without replying, followed the foreigner upstairs.

CHAPTER VIII

A NEW PRISONER

THE days of seclusion were a delightful monotony, spent in pleasant companionship with Miss Sinclair. A week passed all too rapidly for Tile, but it was a week productive of deeper insight into her nature.

He was not disappointed in her. He found that her beauty was enhanced by a keen intelligence, and a lively fancy, which made her conversation an unending source of pleasure. She had an abundance of personal reminiscences to relate, from which Tile gathered some of her history.

Most of her life had been passed in European capitals. Her parents were dead, her father having been killed in a railway accident near Paris, five years before. Most of her friends, her talk indicated, were in high diplomatic circles; and through them she had acquired a

knowledge of world politics and political intrigue, which embraced all the courts of Europe.

But regarding American politics she was singularly deficient; the great social and economic questions which agitated the country of her birth had aroused only her mildest interest. Yet she seemed acquainted with all the American ambassadors, and with other important officials of the various legations.

"American diplomacy is so stupid," she complained. "It is impossible to become interested in it. Our representatives seem to confine themselves to the uninteresting routine of their missions. Seldom do they engage in the exciting intrigues of the courts to which they are accredited."

"That's just as it should be," commented Tile. "This country will never get into trouble through minding its own business."

They did not venture out of the house, getting what exercise they could by pacing the length of the big sitting-room, and expanding their lungs before the open windows. Letters from Carlton were delivered to Tile almost every day, but the missives were short and uninteresting. As is the

case with many people of facile speech, Carlton's thoughts evaporated like mist the moment he lifted his pen.

The hours that Miss Sinclair spent over her extensive correspondence were periods of reflection for Tile. He acknowledged to himself that he was in love, and several times he tried to summon sufficient courage to speak the words which lay heavily on his lips. Each time the avowal was checked by the congealing thought that he had no right to address himself to her—that he was a married man. Under the strain of his distress, the chain that linked him to his unknown wife was like a compressing coil around his heart.

Toward the end of his second week's stay in the house, Tile observed that a restless, feverish activity took the place of the seeming apathy which had characterised the conduct of the guards. The watchers, five in number, had never intruded into the presence of the young man and Miss Sinclair. They entered and left the house by way of a rear door, and usually kept themselves well out of sight. Now, they were in almost constant communication with Sevier, using the

telephone at short intervals throughout the day, and maintaining open vigilance by night.

Uneasy at the sudden change which had come over the household, Tile asked Miss Sinclair for an explanation.

"I haven't the remotest idea," she said, "unless they scent danger close at hand."

That night, Sevier arrived with additional guards, whom he distributed about the grounds.

"Is there trouble in sight?" asked Tile.

"Perhaps," replied Sevier curtly.

"Can I help in any way? I am as anxious to protect Miss Sinclair as you are."

Sevier regarded him with aggravating coolness. "You can serve her best by doing nothing, and remaining at hand to follow whatever instructions I may give."

"But I hate inaction!" exclaimed Tile petulantly.

"We will do all the active work," the other declared.

"Look here!" blurted Tile suddenly. "Are you playing a double game? Are you pretending solicitude for my life while preparing to sacrifice

it? Now, I don't mean to be trapped like a rat. I'm going to fight and protect her."

"Whom do you mean by 'her'?"

"Miss Sinclair," came the prompt response.

"You have a greater obligation," Sevier intoned solemnly. "It is to your wife, You must protect her, even with your life."

"Then I'm to be sacrificed for a wife whose face I've never seen!"

Sevier fixed him with his cold, passionless eyes. "We bought you," he rasped, "You have twice violated the articles of your agreement—you have already forfeited forty thousand pounds. While it is no part of my duty to conserve your wealth, in the present emergency I warn you that your slightest slip will prove costly."

"And if I renounce the rest of the money—if I forfeit it deliberately—will I be free to do as I please?"

"You will not." The response came in sharp, incisive tones. "You are irrevocably married for five years. Your fate is interwoven with that of the woman you married. Her danger is your danger—it is Miss Sinclair's danger—it is

our common danger. We must ward it off together."

"If I am prohibited, by the terms of my marriage agreement, from inquiring as to the identity of my wife, at least, I may ask in what manner Miss Sinclair's fate is linked with mine?"

"To tell you that," replied Sevier, "would be to reveal the secret which is giving all of us so much anxiety at present."

Further conversation was ended by the sound of scuffling footsteps in the hall, accompanied by the muffled, half-articulate cries of a man struggling fiercely against overwhelming numbers.

Tile and Sevier hastened to the front of the sitting-room, and threw aside the curtains in the doorway. They saw four of the guards overpowering a fifth man, whom they had dragged into the house.

"Go upstairs," commanded Sevier, turning sharply on Tile.

For the first time, Tile observed that his abductor's impassive face showed traces of emotion. A deep concern settled on it, as Sevier watched the guards bind and gag the captive.

Then, drawing the old expressionless mask over his countenance again, the foreigner said, in subdued tones:

"Please go to your room immediately."

Tile could not deny himself several quick glances over his shoulder as he ascended the steps. He saw the captive carried into the sitting-room, and the sliding doors closed behind him. On the landing he met Miss Sinclair.

"Someone has been captured by the guards and brought into the house," he said.

Her face blanched; her lips contracted as in pain; a cold fear seized her. She braced herself against the wall for support.

"Then they have found us!" she murmured.

Tile stepped close to her, laying a hand on her shoulder. "You can count on me," he whispered. "Whatever the danger, I'll be here to protect you."

The emotions which agitated her became so violent that the paleness of her face was replaced by a bright red; her bosom heaved; her knees bent insensibly, until it seemed that she would fall forward on her face. Tile seized her in his arms, and pressed her close to him.

As he held her, the flood gates of his pent-up love opened, and from his riotous lips poured a declaration which he would have given his right hand to have withheld.

"Ethel, I love you!" he whispered. "I love you—you—only you."

The words went through her like an electric shock. She recoiled from his embrace, regarding him with stiffening expression.

Before her cold stare, the mad impulse to which he had yielded took on added enormity. "I'm sorry," he apologised. "I had no right to say it—I shouldn't have said it."

"Leave me at once!" she ordered. There was such cutting disdain in her words, her agitated countenance betrayed such biting contempt, that there was no mistaking the feelings with which she regarded his outburst.

He bowed submissively, and went to his room.

As he contemplated his conduct, Tile could not help feeling contempt for himself. He was not a man of elastic conscience or easy morals, to whom the marriage ceremony was an empty rite, entailing on the husband no obligations beyond the support of his wife.

He viewed the marriage contract as a solemn undertaking, equally binding on both parties thereto. Yet he, a married man, had committed the despicable act of avowing love to a young woman, as he held her helpless in his embrace. That she owed her life to his bravery, that he stood ready to shield her from mysterious enemies who seemed to beset her, did not mitigate the offence.

With the sting of her reproach still darting through his inner consciousness, he resolved to retrieve his miserable conduct.

"I'll win her," he mused. "I'll win her fairly, openly, honestly. She undoubtedly knows of my marriage and the sordid considerations that prompted it. Now I'll let her see how little regard I have for the fortune I earned by it!"

The line of conduct which he mapped out for himself was not difficult to follow. She had not resented the silent adoration he had given her since first they were thrown together through Sevier's agency. He would continue to be attentive to her every want; he would maintain the pleasant relations which had been established

through the days of their seclusion, but not a word of love would he permit to pass his lips.

It was gratifying to think that he was near her, in the same house with her, while danger encompassed her. Perhaps the very peril which menaced her would be the agency of his redemption in her eyes. He was resolved to await patiently, uncomplainingly, her first encouraging intimation of the success of his suit. When that should come, he would sacrifice unhesitatingly the fortune which now encumbered him.

A knock on the door brought Tile out of his reflections.

"Come in!" he called.

Sevier sidled into the room, casting apprehensive glances up and down the corridor before closing the door behind him. His countenance underwent a swift change, however, the moment he had shut the door. The smile which overspread his pasty face seemed to hold the grim satisfaction of the executioner placing the noose about the victim's neck.

"Mr. Tile," he said, "I bring you the good news that you are free. You may return to your club."

Tile's face betrayed his astonishment. "Why this sudden boon of freedom?" he inquired.

"You are no longer in danger," responded the other.

"And Miss Sinclair—is she no longer in danger?"

"Her peril is greater than it ever was."

The words aroused Tile to instant revolt.

"Look here!" he exclaimed. "I can't fathom your craftiness, or explain the motive of your actions. But you kidnapped me and brought me to this place. Now, by heaven, you'll keep me here!"

"Ah! The prisoner does not wish to leave the jail," commented Sevier dryly.

"Not while one of the inmates is in peril."

"But your presence only enhances it."

"I don't believe it," Tile burst forth. "I don't know what sort of game you're playing, but you've dragged me into it, and I'll be in at the finish."

"The chances are you will," rejoined Sevier.

"Now, I'm going to stay right here and see it through. If Miss Sinclair's life is imperilled, I'll protect her. Besides"—Tile sank into the depths

of a leather chair—"I like it so well here that I don't care to go."

Sevier laughed, but his laughter carried no mirth. "Ah! You've changed your mind about prosecuting me for abduction."

"I'm going to remain until I get good and ready to go." Tile leaned back, in an attitude of easy contentment.

"You will leave here to-night, and not return," pronounced Sevier. "Regardless of your own inclinations, you will follow my directions—you will be compelled to do so."

"Suppose I refuse?"

"You will be the only sufferer."

"Do you threaten physical injury?"

"You may interpret my words to mean anything you choose."

"Look here!" exclaimed Tile, falling into the vernacular of the smoking-room. "What sort of game am I up against?"

"You are involved in a most unusual case. We are not engaged in child's play, now—this is a man's game, taxing the resources of minds much keener than yours. Mr. Tile"—Sevier moved closer to the young man in the chair—"I would

sacrifice my own life as quickly as I'd sacrifice yours, if I thought it would save——" He broke off abruptly, bending his gaze on Tile to observe the effect of his unfinished sentence.

But Tile remained indifferent. "I don't care a snap of my fingers for your game," he replied. "I'm playing my own game, now, and I'm going to play it my own way."

"Oh, no, you're not!" Sevier contradicted. "You'll play it my way."

"Then we are acknowledged antagonists, for your way can never be mine." Tile arose from his seat, and faced the Frenchman.

Sevier backed towards the door. From his pocket he took a folded document, running it edgewise across the palm of his hand. "You have seen this before?" he asked.

"I have."

"You observed the effect it had on the police?"

"I did," acknowledged Tile.

"Well, with this document, I can bend you to my will as completely as if I held you under hypnotic control."

"What the devil is that paper, anyway?" Tile

stepped forward, but paused when he observed the other's hand on the doorknob.

"It is evidence of the forethought with which our game has been planned," answered Sevier, with a shrug of his shoulders. "You may as well realise that you are entirely helpless. I can invoke the aid of the entire police department—yes, the legal machinery of the entire State—against you. Mr. Tile, you haven't a single chance; so you may as well submit."

"Submit to what?"

"To my directions."

"And what are your directions?"

"That you pack your belongings and leave this house. I will escort you to the tram line—you see, I have no fear that you will reveal the whereabouts of this place to anyone. In fact, I am sure that, once you have returned to your club, you will not care to look us up again."

Tile had become so accustomed to the other's assurance that he did not pause to wonder at it. Nevertheless, he was resolved to combat Sevier's will.

"I thought I was brought here because my life was in danger," he said tentatively.

"That is correct."

"Has the danger passed?"

"I don't know." Sevier's brow knitted in thought. "I have learned several important things in the last half hour," he said; "among them, that our enemies have located us. But they do not know of your existence; they are in ignorance of the marriage. Until they are informed of the wedding, you are absolutely safe."

"I presume your informant was the captive who was brought into the house by your guards?" ventured Tile.

"Yes—we forced important information out of him."

"Where is he now?"

"He is where he'll be unable to communicate with anyone."

"You don't mean you've killed him?" gasped Tile.

"No, no!" Sevier smiled. "We do not commit bloodshed from choice."

"Then you mean to intimate that necessity would drive you to it?"

"I believe I have already given you sufficient intimation in regard to that. Besides, you ask

too many questions. You should learn to curb your curiosity."

"Doesn't it seem entirely natural to you?" asked Tile, "that a man should be curious to learn the source of his peril?"

"Entirely natural," agreed the other. "I cannot quarrel with you on that score. I should be a bit curious, myself, if I were in your position. But I should be more discreet in my inquiries, if I had your fortune at stake."

Tile profited by the hint. "It would be a waste of words, and a useless sacrifice of money, to ask you several direct questions which are agitating me," he said; "so I'll simply announce my immediate plan. It is to remain here, regardless of anything you may say or do. Mr. Sevier, as you became my host without my consent, you'll have to entertain me a bit longer."

"Very well." With an angry jerk, Sevier opened the door, and left the room.

Tile did not remain long inactive. He waited a short interval, then stepped into the corridor. The other's footsteps sounded faintly at the other end of the hall; but, in the darkness, Tile was unable to make out Sevier's form. Groping along

the wall, he moved cautiously to the bend at the top of the stairs, opposite which, he knew, was Miss Sinclair's room. Here he paused, uncertain whether to knock on the door.

He was trying to frame a plausible excuse for visiting her when he suddenly became aware of two voices in a heated argument. Even before his ears accustomed themselves to the rapid interchange of remarks, so as to make out the nature of the verbal conflict, he knew instinctively that one of the speakers was Miss Sinclair.

"I don't want him to go," he heard her say.

"I tell you he must go," a man's voice replied. "It would be folly to keep him here."

Tile pressed his form against the wall, trying to merge into the surrounding darkness. The *rôle* of eavesdropper did not appeal to him, yet he felt justified in listening. A private talk between Miss Sinclair and Sevier, he thought, might prove enlightening.

"I feel safer with him in the house!" came in Miss Sinclair's clear voice.

"We have taken abundant precautions to protect you," Sevier assured her. "They will not harm you, once they are convinced she is not with

you. They have no interest in you, except to force you to reveal the secret of her whereabouts. And, rather than reveal that, I know, you would suffer any tortures they might inflict."

"But if they find out he is married to her, they will kill him," cried Miss Sinclair.

"They haven't learned it yet—perhaps they never will," was Sevier's reply. "While it would be calamitous to have any harm befall him now, it might not be entirely undesirable to have him out of the way later on."

"What do you mean?" Her tone was peremptory, and not without agitation.

"She needs him now, but he may become an obstacle later on."

"Surely, she would not permit an innocent person to be sacrificed?"

"She holds human life as sacred as she holds her own liberty," said Sevier, almost reverently.

"But even she cannot shape the destiny of this young man. Personally, I have no sympathy for him. We tried to insure his prudence by making his curiosity expensive, yet he began his inquiries within a month after the ceremony. If he is inclined to recklessness when he has a fortune at

stake, what will be his attitude after he has lost the money? Why, it will be absolutely impossible for anyone to control him!"

"But he saved my life—I owe him something," protested the girl.

"Miss Sinclair, the interests of the one we are serving rise above all other considerations."

Tile stood as one transfixed. With every sense alert, with every nerve drawn tense, he waited to hear more. But the two within the room spoke now in such subdued tones that it was impossible to distinguish a single word. Quivering with suspense, Tile was about to move closer to the door when suddenly Miss Sinclair's voice rang out, strong, clear, and vibrant, carrying a defiant note which struck a responsive chord in her lover's heart.

"No—I will not have it!" she exclaimed. "He does mean something to me. He means more to me than I would have him know. Yes, you may tell her what I said—she will respect the feelings that prompted it. I have served her loyally—I shall continue to do so. But I tell you now that, if harm comes to him, you will suffer!"

The outburst evidently disconcerted Sevier, for he tore out of the room, and, without troubling to look to the right or to the left, descended the stairs.

Tile followed, a moment later, determined to have it out with him.

The shaded foyer lamp, suspended from the ceiling in the hall, did not cast its illumination beyond the vestibule. Tile was unable to tell whether Sevier had descended to the basement or had passed through the rear door of the drawing-room. Guessing that the foreigner had gone below to see his prisoner, Tile headed in the same direction.

As he plunged forward, four powerful hands seized him from behind; and, before he had the opportunity to make a single outcry, a gag was slipped into his mouth. Next, a bandage was drawn about his head, covering his eyes, and pressing so tightly against the eyeballs that he was compelled to close the lids.

"Once more we shall have to abduct you," piped Sevier.

Tile realised his impotence, and did not waste his strength in trying to break from his

captors. He submitted meekly to being led outside, where he was placed in a carriage. The door clicked behind him, and, as the horse started off at a gallop, he felt the bandages being withdrawn from his eyes and mouth.

The interior of the vehicle, lit by four small lights, soon shaped itself to his eyes; and he noted its familiar construction. It was the carriage in which he had been brought to the house.

At first, Tile paid no heed to the man's form at his side, having taken it for granted that he would be accompanied by a guard. But he did not expect to find Sevier keeping him company on the journey.

"Where are we going?" Tile broke the silence.

"To the Cosmos Club," answered Sevier.

The humour of the situation flashed on Tile, and he laughed aloud. "You had to kidnap me to get me to the house, then you had to kidnap me to get me away from there!" he chuckled.

"I'm glad you don't resent your experience," said Sevier.

"Resent it? Not at all!" Tile beamed. "I'm just wondering what will happen next."

Sevier's impenetrable face hid his thoughts

effectually. If his talk with Miss Sinclair still lingered unpleasantly in his mind, he gave no outward indication of it. Tile, though bursting with desire to touch on the subject, was discreet enough not to mention the fact that he had played the eavesdropper. Besides, Miss Sinclair's admission that she cared what became of him invoked a high good humour which he tried hard to transmit to his companion.

"Don't look so glum," he said. "You see, I'm not resentful of the kindly attentions I received at your hands. I don't intend to make a disturbance, or cause you embarrassment, although you've committed a sufficient number of overt acts to keep you in jail a good many years."

"That's very considerate of you," replied Sevier dryly.

"And, after I reach the club, what do you want me to do?"

"Forget what has taken place, and go about your own business."

"That's a rather difficult task," declared Tile.

"Why?"

"Because I feel a deep interest in a young

woman whose society I enjoyed in your pleasant retreat."

"It would be well for you to forget her, also," replied Sevier bluntly.

"That is impossible." Tile's face took on a purposeful aspect. "Furthermore," he continued, "you'll not keep us apart long. If she's in danger, I'll meet it for her."

"You seem bent on bringing destruction on yourself," the other commented.

"I don't care a rap what happens to me, but I'm going to protect her."

"How?"

The question brought Tile to a realisation of the hopeless position he occupied. As he did not know the location of the house he had just left, the talk of extending protection to its feminine occupant sounded like an empty boast.

"I don't know just what course I shall pursue," he said frankly, "but I don't intend to remain idle."

"No—you'll be kept pretty busy," was Sevier's enigmatic reply.

Tile made no further effort to draw anything out of the foreigner, and the two men rode on in

silence until the carriage stopped and the door was opened by the driver. The familiar white-stone front of the Cosmos Club loomed across the way.

"Good-bye," said Sevier shortly, thrusting the young man out of the vehicle.

Tile crossed the street, and watched the carriage disappear round the corner.

CHAPTER IX

"ARE YOU MY WIFE?"

"YES, I had a splendid time," Tile told his friend Carlton, on the following morning, as they were leisurely eating a late breakfast.

"And Miss Sinclair—did you meet her?" asked Carlton.

"I saw her every day," acknowledged Tile.

"When is the marriage going to take place?" Carlton could not restrain a self-satisfied grin at his perspicacity.

"You talk like a drivelling idiot!" snapped Tile.

"But you haven't told me where you've been all this time," the other persisted.

"I told you I was at the country home of a friend. That's all the information you're going to get out of me."

"More mystery—more mystery!" droned Carlton.

"Yes—and more to come," retorted Tile. "Why, Jimmy, there appears to be no end to the mystifying events in which I'm involved. I don't know what's going to happen to me, but I do intend to know pretty soon where I stand."

"With regard to Miss Sinclair?" Carlton paused in his reach for the toast.

Tile eyed his friend savagely. "With regard to a good many things," he burst forth. "I'm tired of being tossed about like a piece of driftwood. There's trouble going on about me, but I am allowed to see only the shadow of it. From now on, I'm going to pursue the shadow, see whose it is, and act accordingly."

"You talk as though you had a rattling good time," commented Carlton.

Tile inwardly resented the derisive grin on his friend's face, yet he could not blame Carlton; for the latter was entirely ignorant of the strange circumstances in which the young lawyer was enmeshed.

"You'll not sneer when I tell you what has happened to me."

"I'm listening with both ears," said Carlton invitingly.

"I'm not going to enlighten you now," replied Tile. "But you'll not have to wait five years for the story. I'm going to place myself in a position, soon, to relieve myself of the secret; and then, perhaps, I'll call on you for aid."

"I told you before that, if there are any adventures floating about, I want to get in with both feet."

"Well, I'm going to plunge in head first; so don't be surprised if you have to drag me out feet first."

Carlton smiled assuringly. "I'll be on the job," he promised.

Tile lapsed into silence, out of which he refused to be drawn. He felt, somehow, that his respite from his unknown and unseen pursuers would be brief. The dull fear that, at this very moment, while he was lolling comfortably in his club, Miss Sinclair might be in danger, made him hungry for action.

Her avowal, which he had overheard in Sevier's house, had attached him to her as completely as though he were her accepted suitor. And, being a young man of abundant self-confidence, he regarded it as not wholly

improbable that he would one day win her. One thing was clear to him—her part in the intrigue with Sevier and Benson was prompted by loyalty to someone; it was not inspired by selfish motives.

But the mysterious being for whom she imperilled herself, for whom Sevier risked his liberty and expressed willingness to sacrifice his life, for whom Benson evidently was acting—who was she? Her identity, Tile thought, was the key to the entire situation.

Was she his wife? He could not answer the question conclusively.

She was undoubtedly a woman of consequence, one who inspired those about her with a sense of inferiority, who could command the devotion of the resourceful Sevier and the expensive legal services of Benson. That her enemies were equally powerful was evident from their implacable pursuit, and from the elaborate precautions which had been taken to shield her from them. It was plain that the first step in the unravelling of the mystery must be to discover the elusive person to whose service Miss Sinclair and the others were devoting themselves.

After finishing his meal, Tile returned to his room, and busied himself with the counterfoils of his cheque-book. He reckoned that he still had about four thousand pounds of his first year's income. There also remained to him sixty thousand pounds of the principal, which would yield three thousand pounds in the following year.

And he was also the possessor of three millions.

True, the money was but a vague, remote possession, something impalpable, represented by a set of numerals on a sheet of paper. It yielded him no income, lay beyond his power to use for good or ill, afforded him nothing beyond the doubtful satisfaction of proprietorship.

It might vanish and he would not miss it. It might double in value, and not add a shilling to his wealth. Yet its ownership gave him a sense of security, a feeling that the fortune might be used as a club, if it became necessary to use one.

The money, he was certain, belonged to his wife. How she had acquired it, whether by inheritance, business acumen, or fraud, he did not know. Undoubtedly, the income was being paid to her. It made no difference to him, he had no

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covetous eyes for it. But those securities could not be converted into cash without his consent; they could not be permanently removed unless he were willing they should go. That is, it could not be done legally. And Benson, Tile felt, was too shrewd a lawyer to do, or permit to be done, anything that might entangle him in the meshes of the criminal law.

When Benson got ready to relieve him of the proprietorship of the three millions, the lawyer would send for him and make him reconvey the fortune in a perfectly legal and formal manner.

And Tile determined to withhold his signature from whatever documents might be offered until the secret of his marriage was revealed to him. Those bonds should lead him eventually to the identity of his wife.

Now that he was back in the club, surrounded by his friends, he could reflect on his peculiar predicament undisturbed. It seemed incredible that he could have passed through the incidents of the last three weeks. His commonsense refused to admit the possibility of their having occurred, yet his experiences forced themselves insistently on him.

Perplexed, he surveyed himself in the mirror and was surprised to find the reflection of his own image. There was no doubt he was in his room, contemplating the familiar features of Frederick Tile in the polished surface of the looking-glass. His silver monogramed toilet articles were scattered on the dressing-table; the framed photograph of his mother smiled up at him from the top of the mahogany writing desk. Everything was the same as he had left it, even the book he had carelessly thrown on the bed on the day of his abduction.

He descended to the smoking-room and occupied one of the window seats. The same familiar stretch of Fifth Avenue spread before his eyes. Already he felt as if he had dropped into his accustomed place in the life of the city, as if the adventures through which he had passed had been but a dream of the previous night.

But certain figures in that dream remained clearly fixed in his consciousness, stood out so vividly as to occupy the foreground of his mind. Miss Sinclair was one of them, the foremost of them. In her was combined the subtle harmony of form and colour, of maidenly reserve and

intellectual strength, spelling perfection in his eyes. It seemed presumptuous for one entangled as he was to want to possess her. But the longing within him waxed more urgent as the possibility of winning her grew more remote.

He didn't even know her whereabouts, although he had left her only a few short hours before. And the enforced departure brought into closer juxtaposition to her figure, the form and face of the inscrutable Sevier.

Here was another enigma. Sevier no longer had the aspect of a menial. He had loomed big, impressing his personality on the occurrences in which Tile was involved. Oily, insinuating, of indomitable will, he seemed to dominate every situation into which he stepped. It was a domination that looked so easy to overcome, yet somehow one succumbed to it almost without being aware of it. In all his encounters with Sevier, Tile had invariably been beaten.

The befuddled young lawyer recalled that Sevier had spoken of a "she" for whom he would not hesitate to commit murder. That mysterious "she" undoubtedly was the woman he had wed. She occupied a strange, elusive

position in the background of the exciting incidents through which Tile had passed, flitting unseen across the moving scenes, yet making her presence felt like an electric wave.

"What was the source of the invisible energy which she generated?" he asked himself. "Did it spring from her own personality? Was it the devotion universally accorded to exalted position? Was it inspired by blind worship of the money of which she undoubtedly was possessed?"

Calculating for an instant on the future, Tile foresaw himself wandering aimlessly in pursuit of this unknown wife, looking about helplessly for a clue which might lead him to her. But once he found the clue, he resolved to pursue it relentlessly, without regard to consequences.

Throughout this silent self-questioning, he remained painfully aware of the peculiar, unbelievable position which he occupied. He, a New York lawyer, moving with outward serenity in the circle of his acquaintances, yet involved in an intrigue the nature of which he knew not, but which made of him a puppet, a plaything, carrying him through adventures the mere recital of which would have

stamped him as a candidate for the lunatic asylum.

For three days Tile barely moved out of the quiet shelter of his club, indulging to the full the reflective spirit kindled within him. Mostly he sat near the window, preoccupied, gazing on the endless parade up and down the avenue, with unseeing eyes.

Carlton had gone motoring, but was expected back that day. He had heard nothing from Miss Sinclair or Sevier or Benson. Their silence began to get on his nerves. His eyes were famished for a glimpse of her, if only to assure himself of her safety. Also, he felt an awakening sense of activity, a desire to get into action, to turn from the mind-pictures he had been drawing to something more substantial in the way of solving the puzzle with which he was concerned.

He was brought out of his abstraction by Carlton, whose heavy, gloved hand smote him between the shoulders.

"Just got back from Long Island," announced Carlton. "You're going to the Charity Bazaar this afternoon, aren't you?"

"I didn't know there was to be one," replied Tile.

"You evidently didn't keep yourself informed as to what's doing. Love is an awful malady, Fred—isn't it?"

Tile disregarded the jibe. "Where's the bazaar held?" he asked.

"At the King Charles. It's to be on for a week."

"It is needless to ask whether *you're* going?"

"Am I going?" replied Carlton, with an injured air. "You bet your life I'm going. And you're going to accompany me."

"Does a bazaar attract you so much?"

"Tile, old boy, I'll let you into a secret." Carlton lowered his voice, as though he feared being overheard. "I'm in love," he confided. "I'm in as deep as you are with Miss Sinclair. *She's* going to be there, and I want you to meet her."

"I'll go, but only this afternoon," agreed Tile. "No more hanging around bazaars and afternoon teas for me."

"Going to change your ways—eh?" responded Carlton flippantly. "However, I shall be there afternoons and evenings throughout the week."

After lunch, Tile and Carlton visited the bazaar. They found the ballroom of the Hotel King Charles transformed into a brilliant fair, alive with gorgeously gowned women and melancholy-looking men, who tried hard to appear pleased at the petty extortions which were practised on them.

The moving throng held a powerful fascination for Tile, who found opportunity to acknowledge old acquaintances and study new faces. He permitted his eyes to linger on each new feminine countenance, wondering vaguely whether its possessor was involved in the baffling incidents which had followed his marriage.

At one of the gaily decorated stalls, Tile felt a hand tugging at his elbow.

"Here she is," whispered Carlton. "Isn't she a stunner?"

Tile followed his friend mechanically to the counter, which was piled high with an odd assortment of fancy goods; nor could he rid himself of his preoccupied air on being introduced to the young woman who had won Carlton's heart. When he left the stall, after uttering some meaningless pleasantries, he recalled that

the girl's name was Miss Townsend, that he had never seen her before, and that there was nothing in her name or her appearance which could help him out of his perplexity.

At a circular table, on which miniature tin horses spun about a miniature racecourse, Tile became an interested spectator in the scene of lively absorption, in which richly clad women and men in immaculate attire wagered shillings on the outcome of the race, with the same feverish hope of multiplied returns which prevails at the big racecourses.

The young lawyer was studying the faces about him, when his attention was arrested by a man and woman who elbowed their way out of the serried crowd that stood about the table. The couple walked leisurely toward the opposite end of the room, nodding occasionally to other promenaders.

Tile's gaze fixed itself upon the man and the woman, his eyes following their movements until an intervening stall hid them from view. Then he hastened in the same direction. He caught sight of them again as they were approaching the flower stall, and observed that the woman

disengaged her arm hastily, and disappeared into the stall. Tile tapped the man on the shoulder, causing him to turn with a start.

"Mr. Sevier, I'm awfully glad to find you here," said Tile sardonically. "I was about to begin a quiet search for you."

"You can always communicate with me through Mr. Benson," replied Sevier blandly.

"Do you mind joining me in a quiet corner of the hotel lobby? I'd like to have a little chat with you."

"Not at all," acquiesced the other.

"Now, Mr. Sevier," began Tile, when they had seated themselves in a deserted corner of the long lobby. "I can talk with more freedom than when you were my host."

"You may be as frank with me as you choose."

"There are some things I am anxious to impress on your mind." Tile crossed his knees, and bent forward, chin resting on hands. "In the first place, I want you to understand that I don't care a hang about the money that has come to me through my marriage. Whether I lose it or not doesn't make a particle of difference to me. I

want to find Miss Sinclair, and I now demand that you tell me where she is."

"She is in a safe place—one in which she is safe from intrusion," said Sevier calmly.

"I'll not stand any evasions, now!" retorted Tile. "I want to know where she is."

"And if I refuse to tell?"

"I'll *make* you tell."

"You speak in too positive terms, Mr. Tile."

"I am a lawyer, and I know a very simple way of obtaining the desired information."

"By means of legal proceedings?" inquired Sevier caustically.

"By means of a simple writ of habeas corpus. It will not be difficult to obtain a writ commanding you to produce Miss Sinclair in court."

"What right have you to apply for such a writ?"

"The right of every citizen who believes that another is being held in illegal restraint."

"You know that Miss Sinclair is not being restrained of her liberty against her will," protested Sevier.

"I know nothing of the sort," declared Tile.

"Furthermore, I intend to learn the identity of my wife."

"And sacrifice your fortune?"

"I told you I didn't care for the money."

Sevier bent close to the young man—so close that Tile could feel the other's agitated breath against his face.

"Now, Mr. Tile," said the foreigner, "let me tell you something. You will not do as you have just intimated."

"Why?"

Sevier took from his pocket the ominous paper which he had displayed so effectively in the police station. "Because of this document," he said.

"I don't know the contents of the paper," observed Tile, "but I do know that I shall resist to the utmost any move you may make. From now on, I'm going to be guarded by a friend in whom I have the utmost faith; and he will be reinforced by a lawyer, who will look after my interests."

"You are making elaborate preparations for getting into trouble," rejoined Sevier.

"No—I'm preparing to get out of trouble," corrected Tile.

"Don't you think it advisable to consult with Mr. Benson before making any harmful move?"

"I should say not! He's deep in the conspiracy with you. When I meet him, he'll hear a few things that will make his ears tingle."

"What is the cause of this sudden resentment on your part?" asked Sevier soothingly. "We haven't harmed you. You accepted our proposition because you thought it was to your advantage to do so. Except for the possible inconvenience of your stay at my house, you haven't had cause to regret it. If you'll simply forget that you are married, you'll get much more enjoyment out of life."

"How can I forget it?" Tile flashed back. "It is now the biggest obstacle to my happiness."

"Mr. Tile, I believe you are in love!" Sevier smiled.

"Well, I am," acknowledged the other. "And I don't want to remain shackled to an unknown wife."

"But you cannot annul a marriage contract simply because married life has become odious to you."

"Perhaps I can induce my wife to obtain her freedom."

"The lady in the case is as helpless in the grip of circumstances as you are."

"I may not be as helpless as you think!"

"Besides"—Sevier lowered his voice to a soft whisper—"the young woman on whom your affections have centred may be as deeply interested in keeping you married as I am."

Tile caught the hint, but pretended not to understand. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Simply that your rashness may defeat your own purpose."

"Are you going to tell me where Miss Sinclair is?" demanded Tile brusquely.

"I am not."

"Then I'll proceed to find out in my own way." Tile rose to his feet, his eyes searching the lobby for suspicious-looking strangers. Seeing no one who appeared to display curiosity as to his movements, he strode into the big ball-room, and rejoined the gay crowd at the bazaar.

He did not walk about idly, but made a straight course for the flower stall. Near the counter, he paused, taking up a position of

survey which enabled him to follow the movements of the woman whom he had seen with Sevier. Waiting until the crowd at the stall thinned, he strode boldly to the counter.

He stopped between two high banks of roses, and narrowed his gaze on the woman.

Although her back was turned, she seemed to feel his presence, for she turned abruptly, as though someone had suddenly called her name. A tremor ran down her frame when her eyes met his.

"I see you recognise me?" said Tile coolly.

The woman regained her momentary lost composure, and surveyed him with a level glance. "I think you are mistaken, sir," she replied. "May I sell you some flowers?"

Her assurance staggered Tile, and, almost before he realised it, he had bought a pile of red and white roses, tendering a five-pound note.

"We are not giving change to-day," laughed the mistress of the stall, dropping the note into the silk bag strung about her waist.

"May I speak with you in private for a moment?" blurted Tile, ignoring the extortion.

"Oh, I'm too busy," she retorted. "Besides, I haven't the pleasure of your acquaintance."

Helpless and bewildered, Tile watched while she busied herself at the opposite side of the stall, beyond range of his voice. A sudden idea loomed in his mind.

Making his way to the counter behind which Miss Townsend was gathering funds for the various charities represented at the bazaar, he deposited the blossoms in her arms. "Where is Mr. Carlton?" he asked.

As though in response to his query, a man's hand descended familiarly on his back. "Here he is," called a voice.

Carlton's face was wreathed in smiles which told of his appreciation of Tile's thoughtfulness. "It was kind of you to remember Miss Townsend," he said. "Where have you been?"

"Out in the lobby, talking to the gentleman who escorted Miss Sinclair home from the affair at Mrs. Trask's."

"I remember him," replied Carlton. "Looked like a foreigner to me."

"He speaks English perfectly," Tile informed

his friend, "although occasionally one can detect a trace of foreign accent."

Caught in a sudden swirl of humanity which pressed about the counter, the two men were deposited on the outskirts of the crowd.

"I want you to stand by me to-night," Tile whispered to his friend.

"So I'm to be let into the mystery, at last?" said Jimmy inquiringly.

"Perhaps. Are you going to escort Miss Townsend home?"

"No—her brother has assigned himself to that task."

"Good!" ejaculated Tile.

"Oh, you're happy over it!" remarked Carlton, with an injured air.

"I'm not as brutal as all that," said the other apologetically. "But I may need you, and need you badly."

"Well, I'm right here with you. What's up?"

"I want you to come with me to-night."

"Oh, I guess I can trust myself with you!" Carlton laughed.

"Then meet me at the hotel entrance in fifteen minutes."

The two men parted, Carlton going to the cloak room, where he obtained the hats and overcoats which he and Tile had left earlier in the afternoon. Tile strode boldly over to the flower stall, and deliberately thrust himself before the woman from whom he had purchased Miss Townsend's blossoms.

"I beg your pardon for addressing you again," he said, "but I feel certain we've met before."

"I am equally certain we've never met," she replied coldly.

"You don't recall a rather exciting cab ride?" he persisted. "It was snowing that night, and——"

She wheeled abruptly, with all the dignity of legitimate indignation.

Had Tile been able to compel her unwilling recollection into acknowledgment of having participated in that memorable cab ride, it would have been easy for him to follow up the advantage by forcing himself on her attention. But she held herself so well in hand that he realised that his further advances might provoke her into publicly rebuking his persistence. Therefore, he left the stall, and proceeded to carry out the

plan which he had in mind when he enlisted Carlton in his service.

Strolling to one of the stalls in a far-off corner of the room, he purchased a silver mesh purse. This he stuffed with such odds and ends as a woman might carry. Placing the purse in his pocket, he strolled into the lobby, where he met Carlton. The two men donned hats and coats, and made for the pavement.

When they had passed the line of carriages and motor-cars in front of the hotel, and turned the corner, Tile hailed a passing taxicab, and whispered lengthy instructions to the driver. The two men entered the vehicle, and were driven to a point opposite to the hotel entrance, where they could see those passing through the revolving doors, without themselves being seen.

"There they are," whispered Tile, after a wait of perhaps twenty minutes.

Sevier, accompanied by the young woman whom Tile had addressed behind the flower counter, emerged from the hotel entrance and got into a waiting motor-car. Tile instantly recognised the car as the one in which his wife was whisked away on the day of his marriage in

Benson's office. He noted its number, and compared it with the figures which he had written down. They coincided.

Opening the door of the taxicab cautiously, Tile shouted a command to the chauffeur. The car started up Fifth Avenue in the wake of the one which held Sevier and the young woman. Up to Fifty-eighth Street they sped, where the first car turned the corner, and drew up at the entrance to a private hotel.

Following instructions previously received, the chauffeur of the taxicab stopped at the corner, a good half block from the other car. Tile waited until Sevier and the young woman entered the hotel; then he and Carlton alighted.

"Take this purse," said Tile, handing his friend the silver mesh bag, "and enter the hotel. Tell the clerk that the lady who preceded you dropped it as she got out of the car. Refuse to deliver the bag except to the lady herself, and be sure that you find out her name."

"But the purse isn't hers," protested Carlton.

"She'll refuse to take it, of course," observed Tile. "You may then leave it with the clerk, asking him to deliver it to the owner, if the owner

ever appears. Don't, under any circumstances, leave your name."

Carlton walked to the hotel, and entered the lobby, purse in hand. He dangled its bulging form before the clerk's gaze. "The lady who just entered dropped it on the pavement," he said.

"Well, leave it here, and I'll deliver it," replied the clerk.

"I prefer to deliver it myself," rejoined Carlton.

"Are you sure she dropped it?" inquired the clerk.

"Quite sure."

"I'll send it up to her. She may not want to come down for it."

"Very well," agreed Carlton. "Let me have a large envelope."

The clerk complied, and Carlton dropped the purse into it.

"To whom shall I address it?" he asked.

"Miss Fanchot," replied the clerk.

A page took the purse to Miss Fanchot's apartment, but returned in a few moments, with the information that it did not belong to her.

"Perhaps another guest of the hotel dropped

it," suggested Carlton. "If anyone inquires for it, refer him to this address."

Carlton did not give his own card to the clerk. He remembered having the business card of his lawyer in his pocket, and this he delivered to the man behind the desk. Having accomplished his purpose in learning the woman's name, he hastened to the corner, where he met Tile.

"Well?" asked the latter.

"It's Miss Fanchot," Carlton informed him.

"Good!" commented Tile. "What are you going to do to-night?"

"I'm going to the bazaar—that is, unless you have urgent business elsewhere, and want me to come along."

"No—I'll go to the bazaar with you," declared Tile, with sudden resolve.

He did not satisfy the hungering curiosity of his friend at dinner, nor on the way to the bazaar after the meal.

"Wait a little while," he demurred. "Things may happen that will necessitate my letting you into the secret."

They were among the first arrivals at the evening bazaar. Gradually, however, the crowd

began to pour in, until, by half-past eight, the place was so dense with men and women that it became difficult to move about. Tile left Carlton to devote himself to Miss Townsend, while he edged about, in search of Sevier and Miss Fanchot. But he did not find them. Miss Fanchot's place behind the flower counter was vacant. Tile attributed her absence to his presence in the afternoon; and the fact that no substitute appeared in her place indicated that she had been expected in the evening.

Tile had about made up his mind that he would have to pursue his adventures outside the bazaar, when he encountered Benson.

Leaning lightly on the lawyer's arm was a woman, superbly built, the intellectual quality of whose face gave it an attractiveness far beyond its physical beauty. Tile had never seen her before, and for a moment it occurred to him that she was probably Benson's wife. He recollected, however, that the lawyer was a widower; and, instantly, he became possessed with the idea that this woman, too, might be of aid in his self-instituted search.

Tile thrust himself in Benson's direct line of

vision, and was rewarded with a pleasant nod. Encouraged by this, he walked within speaking distance of the man whom he held primarily responsible for his predicament; but the lawyer passed him without taking further notice of him.

As Tile watched the woman pass from stall to stall, he could not help observing the almost deferential air which Benson assumed towards her. He also became aware of something familiar in her graceful carriage, in the upward tilt of her head, and in the floating movement of her walk.

"Is she the woman?" he asked himself.

It did not seem reasonable that Benson would expose her to the dangers which she was making such desperate efforts to avert. Yet, was it not likely that her safety was better assured in a crowd than in the most secluded retreat?

As Tile moved forward to get within closer proximity of the mysterious woman, he had a sensation of being followed. Casting a glance behind him, he observed the eyes of two men focussed on him with the same intensity with which he himself was regarding the woman at the

post. He wheeled quickly, and took a step in their direction.

The demeanour of the men changed instantly, their glances shifting from him to another part of the room.

Tile impressed their faces on his memory, then started again towards the woman whom he had seen with Benson. He paused, however, to make a manœuvre which took his pursuers off their guard. Swinging suddenly about, he was in time to see them exchange a glance of mutual warning before their attention rested on a huge doll, the wax counterpart of a popular actress.

Tile suppressed a smile at the shallow effort to throw him off his guard, but his anger rose at the breach of faith involved in placing him under surveillance. Benson had promised specifically that he should not be followed. Now, he would hold him to his pledge.

"Mr. Benson," ejaculated Tile, intercepting the attorney. "What do you mean by having me shadowed?"

"You're suffering from a delusion," retorted the lawyer icily.

"There's no delusion about it," protested Tile. "There are your hirelings."

The men whom he pointed out made a quick effort at self-effacement.

Benson became visibly disturbed. "I did not hire them," he said. "If they're following you, it is at the instance of someone else."

"Probably at the order of your man, Sevier?"

"Mr. Sevier is not my man," corrected the lawyer. "He's a friend of one of my clients. I am certain the men are not employed by him."

"Well, who else would set a couple of spies on me?" demanded Tile.

Benson transferred his gaze from Tile's face to the faces of the men in question. His lips drew into a scowl; his eyes lit with sullen anger.

"If they're interested in your movements, be careful where you go. That is the only advice I can give you."

Tile's retort died before it was uttered. The woman who had caught his attention, and whom he had followed about, was now standing close beside the lawyer. Benson tried to lead her towards the door, but Tile ungallantly thrust himself forward, in an attitude of expectancy.

Reluctantly, Benson introduced him. "Mrs. Tile," he said, "permit me to introduce a namesake of yours—Mr. Tile."

Into Tile's eyes leaped the bewildered look of a prisoner for whom the prison gate has opened unexpectedly. All evening he had steeled himself for the meeting, which he had resolved to bring about somehow. Now that he had been introduced, he could stammer only the most formal acknowledgment.

"So we are namesakes," he ventured, after a pause.

"It's very curious, indeed," replied Mrs. Tile. "The name is so uncommon. Perhaps we are related?"

Tile detected a hidden meaning in her words.

"Perhaps we shall find that we are closely related," he replied, in a voice which had regained its steadiness.

"Mr. Tile is feeling somewhat apprehensive over the two men he thinks are following him," laughed Benson, trying to shift the conversation.

"How very interesting!" observed Mrs. Tile. "Somehow, one inevitably associates such things

with divorce cases. Are you married, Mr. Tile?"

He scrutinised her with a look of one blinded by the emotions of the moment into making a hazardous confession.

"Don't you know?" he asked accusingly.

Her face seemed to screw itself into a question mark. "How should I know?" She turned lightly, as though Tile's manner annoyed her.

Benson, who seemed to be on the verge of apoplexy, tried to distract Tile's mind with a little side play, directed against the two strangers.

But the young man was not to be deterred from his course.

"Mrs. Tile," he said, "your presence here on the arm of Mr. Benson impels me to ask a question which has agitated my mind for weeks."

"Be careful!" whispered Benson, lifting an admonitory finger.

"Your warning has no effect on me," replied Tile, all his conflicting emotions set astir by the growing certainty that at last he was standing in the presence of the woman who could lead him out of the tangled web in which he was enmeshed.

"Mrs. Tile," he continued, "I ask your forgiveness in advance for the question that I am about to put. But I shall demand a frank answer—no evasive reply will satisfy me." She tried to check him with a glance, but he had worked himself into a frenzy from which not even her chilling silence could rescue him. "You asked me whether I am married. I am."

He paused an instant, in which she made a frightened move toward Benson. Tile interpreted it as an effort to elude him, whereupon he brusquely thrust himself between her and the lawyer.

"I am married," he snapped, as if resentful of the fact, "but I'm going to have the meaningless ceremony in which I took part annulled just as quickly as possible."

"I have no objection," came her calm retort.

"But Benson has—Sevier has—the whole lot of them seem intent on mystifying me——"

"Mystify you?" She assumed a puzzled frown, as if his rambling avowals were meaningless to her. "You appear to be talking in riddles!"

"It's a riddle to me—but not to you!" he fired

back, his gaze alternating between her and Benson as if seeking confirmation of his declaration.

She stood, uncertain what to do. Then she bestowed on him a look of mingled irritation and impatience.

"Please, Mr. Tile," she said, "what are you trying to lead up to? What do you wish to ask?"

"Now, don't be foolish," Benson sought to soothe the young man, but he received in return a look of curt refusal.

For an instant Tile regarded the woman as if trying to collect his thoughts.

"What I want to ask is"—he paused to draw a fresh breath of courage—"are you my wife?"

CHAPTER X

THE SENSE OF DANGER

A RIPPLE of silvery laughter burst from the lady's lips. It was taken up by Benson, but in a faint voice, with an unpleasant, raucous quiver; after which the lawyer's face settled into a sardonic grin, fraught with a meaning which Tile did not misunderstand.

The young man perceived the folly of his outburst, also its futility. But he could not restrain his impetuosity.

"You have not answered my question," he insisted fiercely.

It was like sending paper projectiles against a granite fortification. Benson, unmoved by the attack, simply turned on his heel. His companion took his arm, leaving the embarrassed young man to draw from her silence such deductions as he might.

A full minute passed before Tile recovered from his discomfiture. In those sixty seconds, Benson and the woman had lost themselves in the thick crowds about the stalls.

But the two grim-visaged strangers had not moved from their position in the rear. Their presence, like sinister shadows of an approaching danger, aroused Tile to an appreciation of his position. He speculated vaguely on their connection with the deepening mystery which enveloped him. Were they ranked in coalition with Benson and his crowd, or did they represent a conflicting force in this strange game?

"It's a case of two sides firing on each other, and I'm between the two fires," concluded Tile.

Gradually, his temper rose, until his mind seemed to reflect the conflict of all tempers. He strode to Miss Townsend's stall, where he found Carlton.

"Jimmy," he said, "from now on, please don't leave my side. Furthermore, I want you to sleep in my room to-night. You may have the bed—I'll occupy the couch."

"Oh, very well," responded Carlton willingly.

"Throw a sidelong glance to the left,"

remarked Tile, in an undertone. "The two men leaning against the post have been following me all the evening. I think there's trouble in the wind."

Carlton's eyes followed the direction indicated by his friend.

"I guess we can handle them," said Jimmy, after a short survey. "Why don't you go right up to them and ask them what they mean by dogging you about?" he added, as an afterthought.

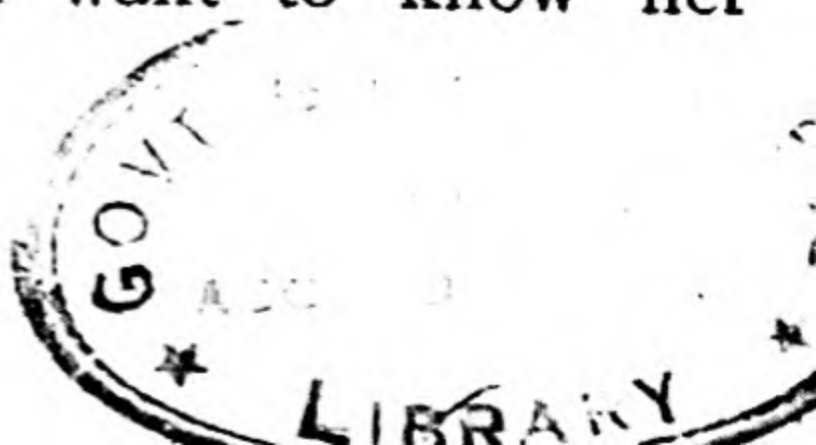
"No—let them play their own game," responded Tile. "I have a feeling that they're going to play into my hands."

Tile and Carlton promenaded the room, the shadows following at a discreet distance. Near the doorway, the friends espied Benson and the woman.

"Do you know her?" asked Tile, pointing her out.

"Never saw her before," replied Carlton.

"Now for a little more detective work," remarked Tile. "They're headed for the cloak room. That means they're going home. Get a cab, and follow them. I want to know her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address. While you are gone, I'll entertain Miss Townsend."

Carlton hurried after the vanishing couple, leaving his friend to devote an hour to the young woman behind the flower counter.

"So Jimmy left to attend to some business," she observed, in response to his explanation of the other's hurried departure. "I didn't know he had any business to look after."

"It's a small matter, and he'll be back soon," rejoined Tile. "In fact, he isn't apt to stay away a minute longer than he can help. This stall seems to hold some subtle attraction for him."

The girl blushed, and hastened to attend to a prospective customer.

In the interval of her preoccupation, Tile looked about for his pursuers. He saw only one of them, and guessed instantly that the other had started after Carlton.

Tile was uneasy until Jimmy appeared at the stall. The latter assumed a melodramatic pose, and whispered hoarsely in his friend's ear:

"I tracked the culprit to her lair."

"Where does she live?"

"Close at hand. Two blocks from the club—just off Fifth Avenue."

"In a private house?"

"Yes—in a private house. Second house from the corner, south side of the street." Carlton's stage whispers had a jocular sound which jarred Tile.

"This is no farce," admonished the exasperated young man. "It's blamed serious."

"Yes!" Again that same, irritating whisper.

"Moreover, you were followed. Did you know it?"

"No." Carlton lost his levity of manner. "It should have occurred to me that one of those spies would follow me, but it didn't."

"Did Benson enter the house?" asked Tile.

"No—he left the lady at the door."

Tile saw at once that a new complication had arisen. The case had reached an acute stage, if his wife's enemies had learned her whereabouts. He was responsible for it, although unintentionally.

"Let's go home," he said. "I want to talk things over with you."

They bade good night to Miss Townsend, and

left the bazaar. Out in the refreshing night air, they headed towards Broadway.

"Let's give our friends a little walk," suggested Tile. "It will do them good."

At the hour when the theatres are discharging their crowds, Broadway is a luminous shaft, set in the very bosom of the city's night bloom. A short walk east or west, and the city seems to have been enchanted into silence. Within the immediate radius of this illuminated thoroughfare, however, the ears are assailed by a thousand noises, each contributing its own peculiar discord, blending finally into a volume of sound which rises heavenward, as though to disturb the slumbers of other worlds. With the falling of darkness, a morning life springs up here; but its bloom is not of the sunshine. Its pallor is that of the cellar-grown plant, its laughter the empty echo of a tired mirth. Yet there is about it all a glamour which beguiles the senses like a pleasant intoxicant.

Familiarity with the scene did not prevent Tile and Carlton from benefiting by its stimulus. They felt the exhilaration of this artificial daylight, as they moved slowly towards Forty-second

Street. Here they turned east, walked to Madison Avenue, and up that thoroughfare to Fifty-ninth Street.

"Our friends are still with us," remarked Carlton, as they changed their course towards Fifth Avenue. At the park entrance, they stopped, and wheeled about. Two forms, dimly outlined half a block away, slunk into a doorway.

"If, perchance, they don't know our address, they wouldn't have much trouble in learning it," observed Tile; "so we'll give them the pleasure of seeing us home."

The shadows remained at their heels to the threshold of the club. Tile did not trouble to observe their actions, as he passed into the big clubhouse. Had he done so, he would have seen one of the men drop a handkerchief, lift it slowly on the tip of his boot, then permit it to fall on the pavement. Again he picked it up, but this time with his hand, and thrust it into his pocket.

At the signal, two men emerged from an areaway across the street, and joined the others at the corner. There was a short confabulation, after which the four got into a waiting carriage.

The clatter of the horses' hoofs, as the carriage passed the window, came into the room as Tile switched on the light.

"Now, Jimmy," he remarked, motioning Carlton to a chair, "I'm going to satisfy a little of your curiosity."

"Fire away," replied Carlton.

"There's a woman in the case—a great personage, who is keeping out of the way of some danger."

"Ah, the plot thickens!" hissed Carlton.

"Now, cut that out!" commanded Tile, angrily. "I'm not telling a funny story. If you want to laugh, why don't you go to a vaudeville show?"

"Go ahead," murmured the other, in a chastened voice. "What is the matter with her?"

"I don't know what the trouble is. But the fact remains that her life is in danger. And we have jeopardised it further to-night."

"We have! What on earth have I done?" cried Carlton.

"You're not responsible. It's all my fault. When I asked you to follow her home, it didn't occur to me that you would be followed, and that

her enemies would discover her hiding place at the same time I did."

"Who is the woman?"

"I don't know," declared Tile. "Yet I am so closely associated with her that we are in equal peril."

"I say, Tile," remarked Carlton, getting up, "are you kidding me?"

"I ought to have known better than to expect anyone to believe me," replied Tile despondently. "If I go on, I'll only succeed in convincing you that I've gone crazy. But you saw the two men. There's no doubt they were following me——"

"Yes, that's so," acknowledged the other. "I apologise. Get the story off your chest—I won't interrupt again." He settled himself in the depths of the big chair, his expression one of serious interest.

Tile observed the encouraging attitude, and continued:

"As I told you, I don't know who the woman is. But that she is of some consequence has been made plain to me in various ways. For one thing, she seems to inspire a sort of reverential

awe among those about her. Why, even the cold-blooded Benson displays towards her a deference that verges on servility. I'm not sure whether the woman you followed is my——" He checked himself with a startled gasp.

Carlton bent forward, an eager light in his eyes. "Your what?" he inquired.

"My partner in this remarkable adventure," pronounced Tile, bridging the gap in sheer relief. "I'm going to make certain to-morrow, whether she is the woman, and if she is, I'll insist on being taken into her confidence. That's all I'm going to tell you to-night, Jimmy."

CHAPTER XI

THE TELEGRAM

On the following morning, Tile arose charged with a new energy, in which throbbed the inspiring passion, which must lead him, hereafter, to happiness or destruction.

"I'll impoverish myself, but I'll win her," he muttered through set lips, while dressing.

The hours he had spent with Miss Sinclair in the lonely country house had burnt themselves into his consciousness as the chief epoch of his life, transcending even his strange marriage. He would pursue her, drag her out of this net of conspiracy in which she was enmeshed, though aware of the wretched figure which he must present to her eyes. His future conduct would compel recognition of the better qualities in his character; he would retrieve the mistake of the mercenary alliance into which he had entered. It

was a gigantic task, with but remote prospect of success, but his purpose was fixed, and he would never turn back.

He opened the window and looked out.

The morning was full of sunshine, invigoration, and healthy animation. With each deep intake of breath, he drew fresh hope, new courage. His spirits rose correspondingly, and several times he caught himself humming a lively air. It was the first time in many weeks that he had felt so cheerful. A fog seemed to have lifted from his brain; his mental perspective lengthened; he felt master of himself.

It was hours before Carlton's usual time for rising, but he got up uncomplainingly when awakened by Tile. He caught the infection of the latter's good humour, and whistled softly while dressing.

"Great morning, isn't it?" he said, between draughts of crisp air.

"Glorious," acknowledged Tile. "Just the sort we want for a mighty day's work."

"Oh—I'd almost forgotten!" exclaimed the other. "What's on the programme for to-day?"

"First, we'll have breakfast," Tile began to

enumerate. "Then we'll stroll about until eleven, after which I'll pay my respects to the lady of last night. After that—well, anything may happen."

They ate a leisurely breakfast, lingering over their coffee and cigars; then went out on the avenue. As if struck by a sudden thought, Tile looked about hastily.

"Our friends of last night seem to have deserted us," he remarked.

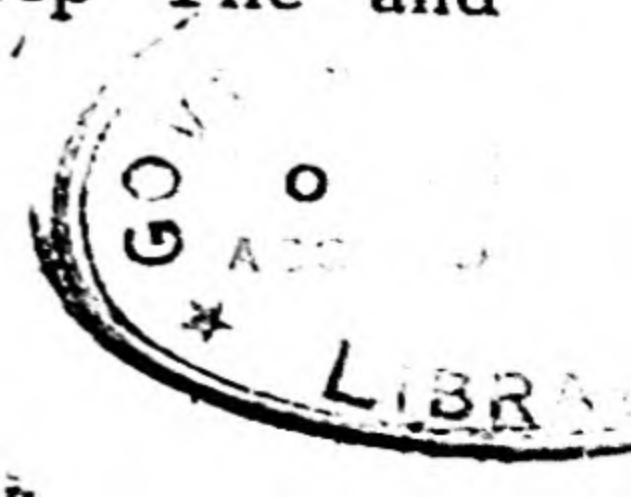
"Perhaps they didn't expect us to be out so early," rejoined Carlton.

"I have an idea they'll be on hand," said Tile. "Keep an eye open for them."

They did not see the men who had followed them about on the previous night, but they did observe two strangers following in their footsteps all the way to Seventy-second Street.

"I guess they're the substitutes," ventured Tile.

To make certain, they turned into Central Park, threading the winding lanes about the big lake. The strangers remained a short distance behind, just close enough to keep Tile and Carlton constantly within sight.



Having still an hour ahead of them, the friends walked back to the club. Tile found several letters in the box. One of them bore the heading of the Empire Trust Company. He was prepared for the contents, and read the note without change of expression. It said:

"We beg to inform you that the trust fund created in your behalf has been reduced by twenty thousand pounds, leaving to your credit the sum of forty thousand pounds. As you are familiar with the conditions of the contract between yourself and Mr. Benson, it is unnecessary for us to enter into further details regarding the forfeiture."

Tile crumpled the letter in his fist, but on second thoughts he smoothed the creases out of the paper, and deposited it in his pocket. The loss of the money seemed to give him a malicious satisfaction, as though it brought him nearer to his invisible enemies.

"Let's start for the lady's house," he said, nodding to Carlton.

Tingling with impatience, he left the club, arm in arm with his friend. It was too important an errand for him to risk being separated from

Carlton by the smallest length. A preconceived trap might be sprung; a thousand and one things might happen. He did not disengage his arm until they stood before the brownstone front of Mrs. Tile's residence.

"Now, Jimmy, you wait out here," said Tile, as he bounded up the steps.

In response to his ring, the door was opened by a maid, who took his card. Several anxious minutes passed before the maid returned. When she did so, she brought the encouraging information that Mrs. Tile would be down directly.

While waiting, Tile had time to observe the drawing-room. It ran the full length of the house, the polished hardwood floor liberally strewn with rugs and skins. The colour scheme was soft and restful, with a faint Oriental touch, and the many curios displayed in odd places about the room suggested wide travel on the part of the collector.

The soft rustling of silk skirts sounded in the corridor, and brought Tile to his feet. He stepped forward briskly to greet Mrs. Tile.

"I don't know how you found my address, for it isn't in the directory or the telephone book,"

she said, "but I presume you came to apologise for your actions of last night?"

It had not occurred to Tile that he had done anything for which he needed to supplicate pardon. Now, however, it burst on him that his tone and manner might well have given offence.

"I'll begin by apologising for my peculiar behaviour," he replied, "but I have come on a far different errand."

"And what is that?" inquired the lady. If she guessed the agitation with which he was struggling, her tone gave no indication of it.

"You ventured out last night at the worst possible time," he informed her. "Your hiding place has been discovered. Benson should not have risked your safety at the bazaar."

The shadow which flitted across her face convinced Tile that he had aimed at the right target.

"Really, I don't know what you're talking about," she said, in an even voice.

He was prepared for the retort; in fact, he had anticipated her line of conduct. But he was determined that she should not evade the issue by pretence of ignorance.

"Mrs. Tile," he said, "it is time to drop the

mask. Our similarity of names is not a mere coincidence. It cost me twenty thousand pounds to put a certain question to you last night, and I've come to demand an answer."

She rounded on him sternly. "Your friends, Mr. Tile, ought to look after you," she said. "Evidently, your condition has not improved overnight."

"This is no time for evasions," he retorted.

The note of irritation in his voice brought an expression of resentment to her face.

"Our interview is at an end," she said, backing towards the door.

But Tile was not to be baulked thus easily. He had too much at stake to accept this curt dismissal.

"I don't wish to appear persistent," he said, in a carefully modulated voice, yet in a firm tone, which arrested her footsteps, "but you must hear me out. Despite your pretensions of ignorance, I am convinced that I am addressing myself to the right woman. When I agreed to the marriage, I was informed that I would be subjected to no annoyance or inconveniences. Your side has broken its promises ruthlessly. On my

part, I agreed not to inquire as to your identity. I have violated the conditions of the contract, and have paid the penalty. I am prepared to go the limit now."

"Are you sober, Mr. Tile?" interrupted the lady.

"Yes—sober, and in dead earnest," he replied. "And if you'll only realise it, we'll have no difficulty in arriving at an understanding."

"What understanding?" She retreated several steps, in the direction of the door.

"An understanding about the future. I'm tired of being linked to an unknown wife. I'm heartily sick of the machinations of Benson, and Sevier, and the rest of your friends. Whatever your purpose was in entering into this marriage, it concerns me only in so far as it concerns Miss Sinclair——"

"Miss Sinclair is a friend of mine," interjected Mrs. Tile.

"I know it," he went on. "She's been loyal; she endangered her life for you. She'll help to protect you to the end. But you are in greater danger, now, than you ever were. Your enemies are virtually at your back. I'll extend all the aid

in my power, but I want to know what I'm about. I must share your secret with you."

The smiling indifference of her demeanour began to rasp on his nerves.

"This is all very interesting," she said, "but it is a riddle to me. I know of no secret to share with you."

"I am entitled to know what this mystery is all about!" blurted Tile, his anger rising.

"You have evidently mystified yourself," she replied, with aggravating calmness. "You speak of secrets as though we had shared in some crime. You presume to speak to me as though I were——"

"My wife!" He ended the sentence for her.

"Exactly!" She regarded him almost compassionately.

"Aren't you my wife?" he asked hoarsely.

"Are you serious?" She laughed.

"Do I look like a man who is perpetrating a hoax?"

"You are evidently too greatly agitated over something to be held responsible for your words."

"You seem to evade my direct question," he said.

"It is an unconscious evasion, I assure you. What do you want me to answer?"

"Are you my wife?"

She appeared to be overcome by a sudden access of mirth. But the smiles which wreathed her face looked forced to Tile.

"A direct answer will clear the atmosphere," he declared.

"I can hardly be the wife of two men at the same time," she asserted.

"That is very obvious," retorted Tile. "But that doesn't answer my question. A simple 'Yes' or 'No' will suffice."

"Then I answer—no."

The reply came like a blow in the face, where one has expected a caress. Before its sharp impact, Tile's mind reeled and staggered, and lost itself in a blazing trail of fragmentary thoughts and visions.

"Then I have been deluded," he stammered.

"You have deluded yourself," returned the lady.

"Well, who is she, then?" he cried, in his

perplexity. "To whom did Benson unite me? Where are the moves and cross moves he is making leading to? What is his crafty brain steering me into?" Then, suddenly recollecting her presence, and the foolish figure he was cutting, he turned humbly to her. "I apologise —most sincerely," he said. "I'm sorry to have annoyed you."

She came forward and extended her hand. The mirth had gone from her face, and lines of worry showed their faint outlines on her forehead.

"Mr. Tile," she said, "perhaps I can help you. I shall try."

"Then you do know?" He grasped eagerly at the thought. "You are involved, too? I thought Benson had a purpose in bringing you to the bazaar. But—in heaven's name, tell me, if you're not my wife, how did you come to attach yourself to my name?"

"By the simple process of marrying Mr. Tile," she informed him.

The young man's eyes narrowed on her in one long, searching glance. "Another Mr. Tile?" he inquired.

"Of course."

"May I inquire his whereabouts?" asked the young man suspiciously.

"He is homeward bound from a diplomatic mission in Europe."

Tile sensed another connecting link in the mystery. "Homeward bound?"

From the folds of her gown, Mrs. Tile took a blue envelope. From this she extracted an oblong sheet, which she handed to him.

"A wireless message from my husband," she said.

Tile read the message with overhanging eyes:

"Home Saturday. FRED."

"Then his name is Frederick Tile?"

"So it would seem," answered the lady.

"And he'll be back on Saturday?"

"So the message states."

"And the mission that took him to Europe—does it concern my affairs?" he asked.

"In a way—yes."

"And the affairs of my wife?"

"The affairs of a kingdom," she said in solemn tones.

It was the first time since his marriage that he had met any degree of frankness, and Tile felt encouraged.

"Mrs. Tile," he said, bestowing on her a look of hopeless appeal, "I am entirely bewildered. Every move I make in my efforts to extricate myself out of the mess into which I've stepped, seems to involve me more deeply. You appear to know a great deal about this affair——"

"As a matter of fact, I know very little," she interrupted.

"But your husband——"

"He is associated with Mr. Benson in several enterprises; that is all I know."

"But you have spoken frankly to me, which appears to be against Mr. Benson's policy."

"I have been as frank as Mr. Benson has permitted me to be."

"Then you, too, are employed in this game—you——"

"Mr. Benson thought you would call here this morning. I am acting under his instructions."

"And they are?"

"To tell you what I've already told you. And I may add, that you will serve your interests best

by doing nothing further to interfere with Mr. Benson's plans. Besides, my husband may bring news of the gravest import—news that may result in clarifying the entire situation."

"But will it relieve me of the doubts—of the harassing uncertainties that are driving me into conduct befitting an insane man?"

A tolerant smile played about her lips as she took a step closer to the distraught visitor.

"Mr. Tile," she said, "your position should be very clear to you. You entered into a certain agreement which you have failed to keep. My advice to you is to cling to the bargain you made."

"But I can't!" he burst forth, eyeing her beseechingly. "I tried to do it—I meant to keep faith. It looked so easy when I signed the agreement! At first curiosity prompted me into rashness. But now"—his voice sank to a tremulous monotone—"now it is love."

"Love!" she echoed, lifting her eyebrows.

"Yes, I'm in love with Miss Sinclair," he acknowledged. "I've struggled against it, just as I struggled with my curiosity. But it's useless. I've cursed myself over and over again for

having entered into a marriage that must make her despise me—that must reveal me as a reckless, sordid, mercenary character, ready to sell himself to anyone possessed of the price. But I want to prove to her that there were extenuating circumstances. I'm going to rise above that wretched marriage! I'm going deliberately to sacrifice the fortune that came to me as a result of it—I'm going to fling that money back to its source—purge myself of its contamination. I'm going to start anew, but I want the opportunity of winning her—I ask only a fair chance."

His frank outburst had a visible effect on Mrs. Tile. Being a woman, she could not help being drawn to him.

"You have another woman to think of," she replied, not unsympathetically. "The woman who entrusted herself to you. You may not know her; you may be unaware of the reasons which forced her into a position from which most women would shrink. But you are bound to her by a solemn pledge—your first thought should be to protect her."

"I'm entirely willing," he retorted eagerly. "I'll stand by her, fight for her, sacrifice myself

in her aid. But I refuse to be kept longer in the dark as to the movements around me. I want to know who she is—I want to know who menaces her; what danger encompasses her. Her fight seems to be your fight, your husband's fight, Benson's fight, Sevier's fight, Miss Sinclair's fight—everybody's fight but mine. Why don't they trust me——"

"Have you shown yourself worthy of trust?" she interjected.

The question came as a staggering retort to his impassioned appeal. It left him without a defence.

"No," he admitted. "I suppose I have acted imprudently."

"You certainly haven't been very diplomatic," she replied.

"What would diplomacy have availed me?" he fired. "What I should have done was to have escaped from this cross-fire of intrigue. But I couldn't tear myself away from—her. Well, I'm here now, and I'm going to see it through." A defiant note crept gradually into his voice. "I've been a human football, kicked about by invisible feet. But I warn them all now to come

out of their coverts, to reveal themselves or take the consequences. I'm gratified to know, Mrs. Tile, that you're not the woman who is being pursued by these mysterious enemies, for then I haven't endangered you by coming here. I don't want to reveal her hiding place to them. But if I'm not guided out of this enigma pretty quickly I shall take steps to smash this conspiracy—whatever may be its object."

The threat left her entirely unperturbed.

"If you do," she said, "you will destroy all hope of ever seeing Miss Sinclair again. I advise you, Mr. Tile, to check your impetuousness and wait until my husband returns from abroad."

She arose, signifying that the interview was at an end. He left the house, possessed of a depressing melancholy, conscious of the multiplying difficulties of his search. Twice he had felt certain that he had discovered the identity of his wife. But each time he had ascertained the error of his surmise. He had guessed incorrectly with regard to Miss Sinclair; and he was equally in error when he asked the fatal question of Mrs. Tile.

Only one woman remained now—Miss

Fanchot, his carriage companion, who had aided in his abduction. It struck him as the odd climax of all his adventures—to have been kidnapped by one's wife. But he did not laugh; he saw no humour in the situation. He was tensely serious as he descended the steps and joined Carlton.

"Let's return to the club," he said, starting in the direction of Fifth Avenue. They had gone but a few short steps when the two men who had been shadowing them hurried forward to meet them.

"Mr. Tile," said one of the shadows, "may I have a few words with you?"

CHAPTER XII

PLOTS AND COUNTERPLOTS

"No!" thundered Tile, edging closer to his friend Carlton.

"But it is of the utmost importance," the shadow persisted. "I have a message to convey to you."

"Then convey it at once."

"But it is for you alone."

Tile waved him aside with a gesture of impatience. "You have been set to spy on me. I don't intend to fall into a new trap."

"You are using harsh terms, Mr. Tile," said the stranger. "I have been trying to obtain certain information. It concerns the whereabouts of a woman whom we are seeking. It may be to your great advantage to hear my message."

"I'll not be separated from my companion,"

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insisted Tile. "If you cannot speak in his presence, then you're wasting your time."

After a moment of thoughtful silence, the other said:

"Mr. Tile, will you make an appointment at your club with one who is able and willing to repay any service you may do for him?"

"Who is he?"

"For the present he is Mr. Druet."

"What is his real name?"

"That is for him to reveal."

"What does he want of me?"

"He will explain his errand fully."

"All right; tell him to be at the club in an hour," said Tile.

The two shadows disappeared without further parleying. Tile and Carlton, arms linked, walked to the corner and turned down Fifth Avenue.

"Are you really going to see that fellow?" asked the latter.

"Yes," replied Tile. "Nothing can befall me in the club. He certainly wouldn't select it as the place to commit violence, if that is his ultimate intention. Nevertheless, I want you to

remain within signalling distance while I'm talking with him."

The two men entered the clubhouse and occupied themselves in discussing the situation over glasses at one of the round tables in the café.

"Why don't you let me into the whole secret?" asked Carlton. "I've been doing a lot of guessing, and getting nowhere?"

"I've been doing more guessing," responded Tile, "and have arrived at the same destination."

"But what is it all about? What the devil kind of a game are you involved in?"

"That's just what I'm trying to find out."

"Oh, say, quit this enigmatical talk!" Carlton frowned. "It's getting on my nerves."

"It's been on my nerves for several weeks," retorted Tile. "You're not half as mystified as I am."

"But how on earth did you get yourself into it? Or were you thrust into it?"

"I told you some time ago," said Tile, "that some day I'm going to recite to you the queerest story you ever heard. And it's all true—happened right here in New York! It's the

story of a man who was handed a hundred thousand to marry a woman——"

"What!" blurted Carlton, a look of incredulity on his face.

Simultaneously with the exclamation, a page appeared with a letter in an envelope that had become familiar to Tile. The latter's eyes lingered a moment on the printed heading of the envelope, then he tore it open, noting the contents in a single glance.

"We have charged the usual forfeit against your account. You have left, now, the sum of twenty thousand pounds."

Tile placed the letter in his pocket, remarking at the same time:

"Carlton, old boy, it won't be long now before I let you into everything that's been doing."

Realising the futility of further attempts to draw information out of his companion, Carlton became absorbed in his own reflections. The two men maintained an unbroken silence until the page reappeared and announced that Mr. Druet had called to see Mr. Tile.

Leaving Carlton temporarily in the café, Tile hastened into the reception-room. He paused,

with an involuntary exclamation of surprise, on the threshold. His expanding eyes wandered up and down the visitor's form, then focussed themselves reminiscently on the man's face. There was something elusively familiar about the features, but for the moment Tile was unable to prod his dormant memory into recollection.

As he stepped forward with a formal word of greeting, a sudden flash illumined his brain, revealing where he had seen the man before. Vividly his mind recalled a figure seated in the waiting-room attached to Benson's office, on the day he had acknowledged the receipt of three million pounds in securities. He remembered also the blanched, agitated countenance of the lawyer when the boy brought the visitor's card. And he wondered vaguely why he had not thought at the time to connect this foreign-looking individual with the conspiracy.

"I trust our interview will be strictly private," said the visitor, accepting Tile's outstretched hand.

"It will be, so far as excluding the possibility of being overheard," Tile replied, leading the way to two seats in an obscure corner of the big

sitting-room. Before motioning the guest to one of them, he was careful to note the presence of Carlton at the further end of the room.

If the visitor recalled having seen Tile in Benson's office, he discreetly made no mention of it.

"I presume you are somewhat surprised at the manner in which I sought this interview?" he opened the conversation.

"Somewhat!" came the laconic response.

"I was in doubt, at first, as to the wisdom of confiding to you what I have come to tell, but this morning I was advised of circumstances which necessitated my conveying certain information to you."

Tile's heart was throbbing furiously, but he maintained an outward show of calm.

"Yes," he said non-committally. At the same time he could not help observing the air of distinction which the visitor wore, and admiring the perfect control he maintained.

"For the present," said the guest in a softly modulated voice, "I am Mr. Druet. Unless the necessity arises, I prefer not to reveal my identity." Tile eyed him gravely, but made no

comment. "But you may accept my word that I represent certain interests in one of the smaller European monarchies and that my mission to your land is entirely a legitimate one."

Tile nodded as if ready to accept the statement on its face value. Inwardly he was wondering what form of deceit the visitor was about to spring.

"Political dissensions in my country," the visitor continued, "have brought about a peculiar situation, one that menaces the safety of our institutions. The conspirators have worked through a woman—my niece. She has been imposed upon, deluded into the belief that she was engaged in a high patriotic duty. As a matter of fact, she was but a tool in the hands of a band of unscrupulous self-seekers. They even induced her to repudiate an alliance with a man of the highest station, a member of one of the most influential families in the land, by playing on her romantic nature until she believed that she was being forced into a loveless marriage to assure the security of a throne."

Tile, aware of an approaching crisis in his affairs, fortified himself behind an armour of

polite attention that securely shielded his throbbing emotions. Beset by the fear of committing an indiscretion of speech, he refrained from making any comment. Druet, accepting Tile's silence as a signal of profound interest, continued:

"When the advantages of the proposed alliance were urged on the woman, she sought refuge in flight. Rather"—he hastily corrected—"she was spirited away. She is now in this country, under an assumed name, hidden and shielded by the conspirators. I came over here with the man whose wife she should have been before this. We instituted a diligent search for her, but as yet we have failed to discover her whereabouts. But we expect to locate her within a few hours, having obtained trace of several persons who were her associates abroad, and who now are in this city. However, all this is preliminary to the real purpose of my visit."

He paused an instant, directing an inquiring gaze at the face of his hearer. But Tile, summoning all his reserve, betrayed none of the anxious curiosity he felt.

"Being an American," Druet went on, "I take

it you have but meagre interest in monarchic institutions. But the same spirit of justice prevails in republics and monarchies, and it is through the medium of this universal justice that I shall endeavour to enlist your aid."

Tile was listening attentively, silently discounting every statement of the visitor. Whether it was all utter falsehood, or truth distorted, he could not tell; but that behind Druet's seeming frankness lurked a hidden, selfish purpose, he was convinced.

"Being a lawyer," Tile made his first encouraging comment, "I am familiar, at least, with the theory of justice."

"And I trust that in this instance you will join in its practical application," returned the caller, injecting a fervent note in his voice. Then, as if unfolding a carefully thought out plot, he continued: "When my niece left her native country, she took with her securities worth several million pounds. These securities, we believe, have fallen into the hands of the conspirators. Just how it was accomplished, how my niece was duped, I do not know. But her millions

are being used now to promote revolt, and it is in this connection that you figure."

"How?" burst from Tile's lips.

"Someone, Mr. Tile, is impersonating you abroad," replied Druet. "I am aware that in some way or another you are connected with Mr. Benson. But my agents have learned that your relations with him are not entirely amicable—that there appears to be some friction. Now if it is a question of money, I am prepared to repay you amply for whatever aid you give me."

"But I don't see yet just what I have to do with it," said Tile, pretending a growing bewilderment.

"Mr. Benson represents the interests opposed to us. I am aware of his shrewdness, and I guess that whatever has been your part in the conspiracy, it has been but a minor one; that you have been kept in the dark as to its real purpose. They sent abroad someone who has posed as Frederick Tile—impersonated you. I received word yesterday that he displayed a certificate of deposit of three million pounds, issued by the Consolidated Trust Company, and made out in the name of Frederick Tile. This money was

promised our opponents, to be used, if necessary, in the cause they are promoting. The sight of so much available money has given new impetus to a waning movement. You see, I am entirely frank with you. That money, or its equivalent in negotiable securities, is now on deposit with the Consolidated Trust Company. Undoubtedly it is my niece's money—it is plain that in her blind confidence, she was induced to make it over to you. What persuasions were used, I know not.

"But we are combating power and influence with opposing power and influence. A secret inquiry in the office of the trust company revealed that no officer of the institution has ever seen Frederick Tile; that the securities were deposited by Benson, and our investigation of you has convinced me that either you are ignorant of all this wealth standing in your name, or that you have played a passive part, in the hope of reward."

"But why should they deposit the money in my name?" asked Tile, successfully feigning ignorance.

"For a very apparent reason. Had the

securities remained in the possession of my niece, there was danger of their being stolen. They also reckoned that if, perchance, we found her, we should have no difficulty in convincing her of the error of her course, and the money—money, in the end, is the great essential to the success of all political enterprises—would be lost to them. On the other hand, had the securities been deposited in her name, I could easily have begun proceedings to prevent their being converted into cash. In fact, I came to this country prepared to tie up that fortune so as to make it unavailable for the purpose for which it was intended."

"And her marriage? Do you believe you can convince her of its desirability?"

"In this country, of course, we are helpless. As a lawyer, you must be aware of the difficulties we have to encounter. But once we induced her to return to her own land, where she rightfully belongs, the matter would be easy."

Things that had been obscure to Tile began to shape themselves to his mind's eye. If Druet was telling half the truth, Tile saw wherein he held the position of command.

"What do you wish me to do?" he asked, checking a rising impulse to exult.

"Go to the office of the trust company, identify yourself as Frederick Tile, and withdraw the money left there in your name."

"And then?"

"Await my further instructions."

"And if I do it—what am I to receive?"

"We will agree to pay you two hundred thousand pounds."

"In exchange for the three millions?"

"We do not ask you to surrender anything to us. We shall simply ask you to keep the securities until my niece, the rightful owner, requests their return. That is," he added hastily, "until she makes the request in my presence."

Tile leaned back in his chair, an amused expression on his face.

"Evidently, Mr. Druet," he said, "you appear to regard me as a child—as being bereft of all power of penetration. What you have told me may or may not be true. At any rate, it is interesting. There really may be such an intrigue as you have described. It may be that I am in a way interested in it. But I cannot believe that a

man of your apparent perspicacity really thought that by coming here, spinning a yarn such as you have spun, you could induce anyone in his right senses to associate himself with you."

"Mr. Tile," the other said slowly, "the man who has been impersonating you abroad will be back in this city to-morrow. By to-morrow night the securities and your hope of reward may vanish beyond recall."

"I have only your word as to the existence of the securities. The word of a man I don't know, who is masquerading under an assumed name, and who attributes to me a child-like credulity——"

"You know of the securities," the other interrupted with a trace of anger. "Now, my dear sir, if you resent my regarding you as credulous, don't assume that I would be foolish enough to come here and tell you what I have just said unless I were certain in advance that you would carry out the purpose of my visit. I came here confident of the success of my mission. I am absolutely sure of it now."

Tile resented the cool assurance that accompanied the words.

"Then you believe that I have swallowed your story—bait, hook, and line?"

"I know that you have risen to the bait—as we used to say when I was fishing in Canada some years ago."

"You think——"

"I know that you will at once endeavour to ascertain the truth of what I have told you."

"And how do you think I shall proceed?" Tile tried to inject a note of sarcasm into his voice.

"By going direct to Mr. Benson and repeating what I have just said."

"And if I do?"

"That is exactly what I want you to do."

Before Tile recovered from his surprise, the visitor was gone.

CHAPTER XIII

"YOU ARE IN THE PRESENCE OF HER HUSBAND"

ANGER succeeded bewilderment as Tile rose from his seat, walked with slow, deliberate steps across the room and threw himself upon a seat beside Carlton. He had the feelings of one standing above a trap, set and ready to be sprung. He had thought, while listening to Druet, that he detected in the narrative illuminating flashes that pierced the darkness in which he was plunged. Several times he had felt himself close to revelations that would clear the entire mystery in which he was involved. He thought that he had glimpsed at the nature and extent of the intrigue that brought him a wife and a fortune, but as he pondered Druet's words, he

was overwhelmed by a sense of confusion, tossed about hopelessly in a riot of plots and counter-plots.

Nor did his mounting rage help to dispel the turmoil of his brain. The calm insolence with which his visitor had played his hidden hand aroused a stinging resentment, all the more acute because of its impotence. Mocking echoes of Druet's words were still ringing in his ears. The aggravating confidence with which he had announced the success of his call, the devilish calculation of the man, his emphatic announcement that Tile would at once seek Benson, combined to arouse in the young man a spirit of antagonism that soon condensed itself into purpose.

And that purpose was to frustrate Druet by sedulously avoiding Benson, by maintaining a strict silence as to the stranger's visit. In that manner he would nullify Druet's unrevealed design, while retaining such information as the visitor had imparted.

The thought that perhaps Druet was an agent of Benson, sent to trap him, did not escape Tile. But it was offset by an instinctive feeling that the

two men were working at cross-purposes; that they were opponents in a game in which the stake was sufficiently big to tempt their covetous natures. And in this belief, Tile trusted his instinct.

"Well, what did the villainous looking Dago want?" asked Carlton with a show of impatience.

"I haven't fathomed the real purpose of his call," Tile replied, coming out of his preoccupation.

"Now cut that out!" growled Carlton. "This blamed mystery business is getting tiresome. I'm getting to feel so spooky that soon I'll be seeing the ghosts of my ancestors."

"Just restrain your impatience a little while longer," pleaded Tile. "Things are rolling to a climax and you'll be in on it."

"Then you're not going to tell me what that fellow wanted?"

"You wouldn't understand if I did. I'm absolutely truthful when I say that I don't know what he was after. He told me a story, part of which is undoubtedly true. At least, I believe so as the result of my experiences in the past few weeks. But why he should have come to me

I don't know, except that he expects me to fall in line with whatever scheme he has on foot."

"Well, what did he want you to do?"

"For one thing, to see Benson."

"And are you going to that old fox?"

"No!" Tile emphasised it with a comprehensive sweep of his hand. "I made certain plans this morning, and I'm going to carry them out. I'll not deviate from the line I've mapped out for myself—not for Benson nor the whole crew that is engaged in thwarting me."

"Then you have risen to sufficient importance to engage the attention of Benson?"

"I'm only a minor character in the game so far as he and the rest are concerned. There's a woman in it, and until I find her I'm fettered, tied hand and foot, checkmated—I may even be in personal danger. I've got to find her, Carlton —I've got to break the bond that restrains me from declaring myself to the one woman I care about. When I started out this morning, I was as sure as any man can be of anything in this world, that I was going to the house of the woman who has me enslaved."

"And you found you were wrong?"

"Exactly. I made a blithering idiot of myself. But I'm in so deep, now, I might as well hit the bottom."

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a page, who informed Tile that he was wanted at the telephone. He hastened to the box, and remained locked within about five minutes. When he rejoined Carlton, he said:

"Benson wants to see me at once. Get your car and we'll go down there."

Half an hour later, the two men stopped their automobile in front of the lawyer's office. They ascended in the lift, Carlton waiting in the hall while Tile was ushered into Benson's private room. The lawyer nodded curtly to the young man, without looking up from the mass of papers that littered the desk.

"Mr. Tile," he said, "the time has come to relieve you of the burden of the securities that were made over to you."

Tile vouchsafed no reply. An expression of unalterable determination succeeded the inquiring look with which he had entered the office.

"The transfers have been drawn up," Benson spoke in even voice, "and await your signature."

"It will not be forthcoming," Tile announced in equally cool tones.

"I anticipated as much," was Benson's dry rejoinder. "Nevertheless, I should like to know the reason for your refusal."

"I prefer to keep the money." Tile scrutinised the lawyer, trying to read surprise in that inscrutable face. If Benson felt any amazement at the young man's attitude, his countenance did not betray it. The only visible sign of emotion was the faint trace of a sneer that flitted across it.

"That may be a sufficient reason for one possessed of your cupidity," Benson remarked. "But you'll gain nothing by your refusal."

"I don't care a damn for the money!" Tile contradicted his first statement.

"Then why do you withhold it?"

"Because I don't know to whom it is going. I shall hold it as the purchase price of my freedom from——"

"Then you'll surrender it on certain conditions?" Benson interrupted.

"On condition that my marriage be annulled."

"Your condition is accepted," Benson returned, keeping his eyes fixed on the documents on his desk.

Tile, never having acquired mastery over his emotions, looked his amazement.

"Then I shall be free immediately?" he asked.

"As rapidly as legal papers can be drawn up and submitted to the courts."

"And I shall be permitted to see Miss Sinclair?"

"Is that another condition?" Benson asked sarcastically.

"It is."

"Miss Sinclair must decide that for herself."

"But you will take me to her—you'll reveal her whereabouts?"

"I shall inform Miss Sinclair of what transpires in this office to-day."

"But I must see her!" Tile persisted. "I want an opportunity to explain, to mitigate my conduct in her eyes! I demand that opportunity."

"If she wishes it, you shall have it," Benson promised. "The papers are ready for your signature."

Tile hesitated. He was reluctant to affix his name to documents that would for ever deprive him of the last chance to enforce his conditions.

"I think I'll wait until my terms have been complied with," he said in a tone of finality.

"But that's impossible!" urged Benson. "We must have the securities at once. The future of the woman to whom you're married may depend on them."

"Then permit me to see her and receive her command from her own lips."

"That's impossible!" snapped Benson.

"Why?"

"It is impossible—absolutely impossible!" the lawyer repeated, with slow emphasis.

"But I shall respect her secret—her disguise!" Tile promised.

"You cannot see her," came the discouraging response.

Tile felt his mind wavering. The consummation he so devoutly desired—the annulment of his marriage, was promised in return for the securities. They were of no use to him; he could not, and he would not if he could, divert them from their rightful owner. Yet he felt a strange hesitancy

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about signing the documents which Benson had prepared. Sorely perplexed, he remained in his seat, silently arguing with himself. He had not come out of his uncertainty when the green baize door swung open and the office boy entered with a card. Tile observed the tremor that ran down Benson's frame as his eyes fixed themselves on the bit of pasteboard.

"Tell him to wait," the lawyer said.

The boy left, but returned in a moment.

"The gentleman says he is aware of Mr. Tile's presence in your office and that he must see you immediately."

"All right, show him in!" Benson seemed to draw within himself as he said it. His lips set grimly, an icy glint leaped into his eyes, the aspect of his face presaged inevitable conflict.

The visitor entered. It was Druet.

"Mr. Tile," said Benson, unable to control the note of agitation in his voice, "for the present, I believe, our business is at an end. The transaction of which we spoke will await a future opportunity."

"Don't go, Mr. Tile," requested Druet. "Your presence is very much desired just now. You

see, I guessed right when I said you'd come here and tell of my visit to you."

"Your visit!" Benson exclaimed.

"I hadn't mentioned it," declared Tile, with an air of satisfaction.

"Then you are engaged in a little game of your own?" Druet asked ironically. "What duplicity are you attempting?"

Tile bestowed on him one swift glance of angry reproach.

"You two gentlemen seem to have a monopoly of that sort of thing," he said.

Druet ignored the fling. His eyes, like twin searchlights, swept the faces of the two men, as if trying to detect their attitude with regard to each other.

"I have come," Druet said, "to establish, if possible, a basis of understanding between Mr. Tile and myself. I have walked into the camp of the enemy for the very obvious reason that I can best convince Mr. Tile of my sincerity and earnestness, by speaking in the presence of his employer, Mr. Benson. Moreover, I want Mr. Benson to hear what I have to say, for it may effect a readjustment of our relations—it may

avoid a great deal of embarrassment and strife." He paused to note the tense expectancy in the attitude of the two listeners. "Mr. Benson is the attorney for my niece and the adviser of those who have her under control. To-morrow morning, as I previously informed you, the man who has been impersonating you, Mr. Tile, arrives in this city. We know exactly what he has accomplished abroad; we are aware that he has almost succeeded in his mission. Mr. Benson, undoubtedly, has similar information, so it is useless for me to pretend differently."

"To insure the complete success of his negotiations, the securities which now stand in your name are necessary. You see"—he turned, with a curt nod, to Benson—"we have learned many things despite your precautions and bewildering moves. Since you appear to be a gentleman who appreciates the value of money"—he levelled his gaze on Tile—"I am prepared to negotiate for the indefinite retention of the securities in this country. Mr. Benson, no doubt, has offered to pay you handsomely for the return of the bonds. I stand ready to double any price he may offer if you will refuse to accede to his request."

A darting sense of insult brought the blood to Tile's cheeks. But he checked a sharp, angry retort with the reflection that perhaps, in the bargaining, the revelations he had long sought would be forthcoming.

"What will be the effect of my refusal to surrender the securities to Mr. Benson?" he asked.

"It will frustrate the designs of those who have hidden my niece."

"Mr. Tile," interjected the lawyer, "the remarks of this gentleman must make apparent to you my reason for demanding your immediate signature to the transfers which I have prepared."

Between these two conflicting forces, Tile occupied a position of advantage that he was quick to realise.

"Haste may be essential to your plans," he answered. "It may prove fatal to mine."

"They are embodied in the conditions I named a few minutes ago."

"I accept them unqualifiedly," Benson replied. "Now, will you sign the documents?"

"I want more than the mere assurance of your word," Tile insisted.

"Will you inform me of the conditions?" asked Druet. "Perhaps I can give you the necessary assurance."

Tile pondered the request. He was about to reply, but Benson checked him with a gesture.

"Your words may endanger a life very dear to you," the lawyer informed him.

"I shall say nothing that may cause possible injury to her," Tile assured him. "But the intrigue in which you two gentlemen are involved doesn't concern me in the least. I don't care whether you're fostering a revolution or contemplating any other sort of political upheaval in a foreign country. I am concerned only with the affairs of Frederick Tile, and they're quite sufficient for me. I'm here to protect my own interests, and they seem to urge my retention of the nominal possession of the fortune that was thrust on me."

"Quite right!" commended Druet. "You can't possibly lose by refusing to give up the securities. And when the time comes to deliver

them to my niece, as it eventually must, you will be amply rewarded."

"The time to deliver them, Mr. Tile, is at hand," said Benson.

"Don't be foolish!" counselled Druet. "Remember, I have doubled the price he has offered—whatever it may be."

Tile was content to permit him to believe that it was a question of money. He was not yet ready to dispel the illusion.

"And when will the price be paid?" he asked.

"When Mr. Benson produces my niece and she consents to the marriage which means so much to her family."

"That marriage will never take place!" pronounced Benson.

"I tell you it shall take place!" exclaimed Druet with rising inflection. "It must take place! Does she know he—the man we have chosen for her—is over here seeking her?"

"She is fully aware of it," Benson replied. "She is also conscious of the lengths to which you would go to enforce your will. But you have already been frustrated."

"You speak with too much confidence," sneered Druet. "I do not believe this young man," indicating Tile, "will consent to deprive himself of a fortune to be acquired so easily."

A smile, that held all the biting flavour of a corroding acid, appeared on Benson's face.

"I have sat here and listened patiently," he said, as if to impress his own forbearance on Druet, "while you have been trying to purchase this young man. I permitted your intrusion into this office because of a remote hope that you had been convinced of the futility of trying to force your niece into an unwelcome marriage. Also, because I had hoped that you were ready to bow to the inevitable change that must take place in your country. But I see that your stubbornness is going to carry you to destruction. You are aware, no doubt, that when I consented to shield your niece, I had in mind more than her matrimonial disinclination. I consented to act because of the American capital invested in your country, which I represent. That money, we decided, would be best conserved by a radical change in administration.

"The opportunity to fall in line with the

progress of events is still open to you. You are the brains of the old order, and we are willing to utilise your good will. I advise you to bow to the inevitable before it is too late."

"The old order of things will not change—it shall be re-established on a firmer basis," Druet retorted. "We hold the trump cards. I'll force that marriage. At this very moment we have her at our mercy."

"What do you mean?" demanded Benson.

"I mean that she will wed the man her family has chosen for her."

"That marriage cannot take place," announced Benson impressively.

"And why, please?"

Benson was silent an instant. "Because she is already married."

Druet leaped out of his chair and bent gloweringly over the lawyer.

"You are jesting!" he exclaimed.

"I am in deadly earnest."

"And whom did she wed? When? Where?"

"She was married in this very office," Benson said, naming the date.

"Impossible! It's a lie!" Druet railed incredulously. "Why, whom could she have married in this country?"

"Mr. Frederick Tile."

Druet regarded the lawyer with a vacant stare.

"You are in the presence of her husband," Benson supplemented. "He will substantiate what I have said."

CHAPTER XIV

THREATENED!

THE next few moments were charged with a quivering excitement, too intense to permit of speech. Druet regarded the two men in incredulous wonder. His senses seemed to be slipping away from him; but he recovered them with a violent effort, and, gradually, the full import of the lawyer's words impressed itself on his mind. A maniacal fury gathered in his face; he seemed ready to explode on the spot.

"Married!" he burst forth, squaring his shoulders and assuming a position from which he directed at the two men a glance so full of malignant hatred, so charged with the angry passions that were consuming him, as to cause Tile and Benson insensibly to prepare for active

resistance. "Oh, you needn't fear me!" Druet sneered, noting the interchange of frightened glances that passed between them. "I'm not thinking of violence." He wiped the perspiration that had beaded on his brow, then turned toward Benson. "So you thought to checkmate me by providing her with a husband! You think you've lured me into a glorious fiasco! But I tell you, Benson, you've committed the error of your life. I'm going to repay you in your own coin. No," he cried with rising inflection, "we haven't lost. Success is within our grasp. I'm sorry for Mr. Tile, that's all."

"I appreciate your sympathy," Tile declared with mock concern.

Druet wheeled on him, pointing a quivering forefinger threateningly:

"You poor, pliant tool!" he exclaimed, the keen edge of his contempt cutting Tile with the undeniable truth which it conveyed. "So you sold yourself, body, soul and all, to these schemers! So, through you, a lady of the highest rank has compromised herself! And now you are seated here, smirking in self-satisfied complacency, enjoying what you believe is my discomfiture. It

may be futile to try to purchase you away from them. But you'll not remain, for very long, an obstruction in our path."

It was no new sensation for Tile to be made aware of the miserable part he was playing in this intrigue. From the moment that the first spark of his love for Ethel Sinclair rekindled the waning fire of his better nature, he had seen himself as Druet now pictured him. Ambition, passion, loyalty, conviction—any one or all of them—may have been the moving impulses of the others in this complex plot. But he had entered it as an avowed mercenary; he had believed himself capable of subjugating all his finer sensibilities to the pleasing possibilities of an assured fortune. He had counted on five years of commonplace existence, of indifference to his marriage, of surcease from the intolerable importunities of multiplying creditors—and then freedom from a wife whom he did not know; for whom he held not the slightest affection; who could exert no influence whatever on his future conduct.

He had beguiled himself into the belief that his secret conduct could produce no visible

change in the self-directed current of his life; that the mere transition from poverty to affluence was sufficient to lull into slumberous silence a protesting conscience; that ideals which he had acquired in boyhood, which had remained with him through the period of his adolescence, which had accompanied him into manhood, could be discarded like a worn-out garment, without pain, without shame, without remorse. The lesson of his mistake had been brought home to him before this. Druet's contemptuous reference to him was no harsher than his own estimate of himself. It was no more than his conduct merited.

Wherefore, Tile turned from the purely sentimental, or psychological aspect of his case, to the more pressing drama that was being enacted about him. It had reached a climax in his presence; he was conscious of being encircled by moving, stirring incidents, yet unable to discern what was transpiring. The noise of battle sounded uncomfortably close, the smell of powder was about him; yet the fight was curtained from his gaze. But in the verbal clashes

of Druet and Benson, he saw an opportunity of tearing the curtain aside.

"Your vague threats are meaningless to me," he said, meeting Druet's savage gaze with a look of studied indifference. "You and Mr. Benson have been indulging in a lot of allusions through which I perceive disconnected fragments of some gigantic plot which seems to involve a conflict of vast interests. I confess frankly that I don't understand the part I'm playing in this game, and, moreover, I'm tired of being kept in the dark. I have my own destiny to work out, and the sooner I disconnect it from yours, the better I'll like it."

"You can do so immediately by signing these documents," Benson replied, lifting the papers from his desk.

The request seemed to bring fresh hope to Druet. His demeanour toward Tile underwent an immediate change.

"Then you have really refused to deliver the securities?" he asked with returning hope. "Your attitude here hasn't been feigned—it wasn't a mere pretence to draw me out?"

"I refused my signature before you came," Tile answered. "I shall continue in my refusal until the conditions I named have been met."

"I don't know your conditions," Druet returned, "and I don't suppose you will inform me of them in Mr. Benson's office. But if you'll retain title to those bonds until to-morrow afternoon, I promise to call at your club ready to meet any demands you may make. Developments are pending—in fact, I expect them to bear fruit any moment—which will convince you of the advisability of joining forces with me. Will you wait?"

"I shall make no promise," Tile answered.

"Very well!" Druet thrust a menacing forefinger in the young man's face. "You are evidently unaware of the forces that menace you. I warn you now, that if you surrender the securities, the consequences will be swift and sure."

Druet strode out of the room, leaving behind an impression of desperate resolve, as of one prepared to fight furiously against the destructive forces that held him cornered. In the same instant that Druet's form disappeared through

the door, Benson had recovered his usual composure.

"Mr. Tile," he asked, "are you solicitous for the safety of Miss Sinclair?"

"I am," Tile acknowledged.

"Then the greatest protection you can extend to her is to join in protecting the woman you wed."

"And, I suppose, I can only do that by handing over the three million pounds," Tile ventured to suggest.

"It is," answered Benson. "But I'll not press you for your signature to-day. I shall simply request you not to enter into any alliance with the man who just left. In return, I promise that before to-morrow night I shall convince you that your conditions are being complied with."

Tile nodded acquiescence, at the same time reaching for his hat. The insistent whirr of the telephone made him pause on his way towards the door. Benson lifted the receiver and pressed it to his ear. Whatever the message that came over the wire, it was cut off suddenly, for the lawyer began pressing the hook frantically up

and down. But he was unable to get the connection, his despairing Hellos! bringing no response. He called Central and was about to give a number, but checked himself, as if suddenly recalling Tile's presence.

"Please go at once to your club," he directed pleadingly. "Something appalling has happened!"

CHAPTER XV

THE LAST FORFEIT

UNABLE to learn the cause of the lawyer's sudden alarm, Tile left the office, profoundly puzzled. In the hall he found Carlton pacing up and down nervously.

"Gee whiz!" exclaimed the latter. "I thought you'd never come out."

"We had an exciting interview," Tile replied. "Things are happening, and, Jimmy, if you'll refrain from questioning me until to-morrow night, I promise then to inform you of everything that's transpired."

Carlton gave a reluctant consent, and the two men returned to the club. As they passed down the long corridor on the way to the lift, one of the employees delivered Tile a letter. He was able to guess the contents from the printed

heading in a corner of the envelope. Nevertheless, he tore it open and read:

"We beg to inform you that you have forfeited the remaining twenty thousand pounds left to your credit. The trust fund established in your behalf has been abolished."

Tile felt no pang of regret. He had sacrificed the fortune for which he had sold himself. It had proved a profitless alliance, but he had made it such deliberately, with eyes wide open to each vanishing twenty thousand pounds. He was glad the last of it was gone; he would not have it otherwise. Yet, he could not conceal from himself the possibility that, perhaps, the sacrifice was foolish; that it would lead to nothing more than a return to his earlier poverty; that the woman who had inspired this self-deprivation would be to him no more than a vain longing, a melancholy void in his life.

Through all his reflections, however, there thrilled a new sense of freedom, a pleasant feeling of relief, that rose presently to an exultant independence, as of a struggling debtor cleared of his last obligation.

"Jimmy!" exclaimed Tile, flushed with a new enthusiasm—"Jimmy, I've kicked the shackles off my feet. I can move now unhampered, and, by heaven, I'm going to trim for action."

Nevertheless, he did nothing on that day. And on the following morning he began a restless wait for Benson. No word came from the lawyer, nor had he put in an appearance at four o'clock in the afternoon. Tile called up his office and was informed that Benson had not been there all day and was not expected.

With the knowledge that he had no further sum of twenty thousand pounds to lose, Tile resolved not to wait longer for Benson. The possibility that Miss Sinclair was his wife no longer entered into his calculations. Mrs. Tile had likewise been eliminated—there remained only one other woman.

Miss Fanchot! All the circumstances combined now to point her out as his wife. And he determined to seek her at once, and force the confession from her unwilling lips.

"Come, Jimmy!" he exclaimed with new firmness. "I'm off to interview Miss Fanchot and finally smash this whole mystery."

Tile was uncertain of himself as he entered the lobby of the private hotel to which he had traced Miss Fanchot. His assurance had received many rude blows, but he was still hopeful of the ultimate outcome of his quest. The events in which he moved seemed to be gathering to a head—an ugly, shapeless head, with grim visage of foreboding evil, but preferable to the unseen elements which he was combating.

His name was telephoned to Miss Fanchot's apartment, and, after several minutes of uncertainty, the reply came that she would see him. Carlton seated himself in the lobby, while his friend entered the lift, and was carried to one of the upper floors.

"Miss Fanchot will see you directly," said the maid, as she ushered him into the sitting-room.

The furnishings were of the familiar hotel type. A light green carpet, heavy walnut chairs, a low mahogany table, a divan piled high with sofa cushions, and an elaborately carved overmantel were the conspicuous features of the room. There was an entire absence of those little details

which lend distinctiveness to a room. Plainly, the apartment was but a temporary shelter for its occupants, who held themselves in readiness for instant departure.

"Mr. Tile, I believe." A woman's voice disturbed the reflective mood into which the visitor had fallen.

Tile rose hastily and bowed. He observed that the lady had on a neat tailor-made costume of grey, and that a turban of similar colour, with a single aigrette, crowned her head.

"I hope I'm not keeping you from an engagement," he said, noting that she was dressed to go out.

"Kindly state your business with me," she answered, disregarding his remark.

"Miss Fanchot," he began, "despite your actions at the bazaar, the other evening, you know —and I know—that you were my companion in a little involuntary cab ride."

He paused to note the effect of his words, but her face remained inscrutable.

"Continue," she exclaimed bluntly.

"I have come to ask you to explain your share in that dangerous enterprise," he went on.

"You are jesting," she cried, as though resenting his demand.

"I'm in deadly earnest," he returned. "Moreover, I'll not leave here until you have complied with my request."

Miss Fanchot regarded him with an amused smile, in which lurked the faint trace of a sneer. "If you have fully stated the nature of your business, you will leave at once," she said, in a tone of finality.

She was no longer the helpless woman whom he had overpowered in the cab. Her features, though soft and refined, were aglow with purpose. Lines which he had once taken for marks of suffering, now revealed a nature at once daring and modest—thoroughly feminine, yet conveying a suggestion of masculine strength, as though she combined in her make-up those rare qualities, the blending of which form the woman of action.

The impression that she was of foreign birth and breeding was not dispelled by the brisk, breezy American pose with which she carried herself. Much as she tried to hide it, it was plain to Tile's quick mind that she was playing a part—one in which she had been carefully

coached by a competent teacher. He was convinced that Benson was her instructor.

"Miss Fanchot," said the young man, "you are undoubtedly in the employ of Mr. Benson. You have lent yourself to a dangerous game, with the perils of which you are acquainted. You are a woman of courage—your conduct in the cab was convincing proof of that. Undoubtedly, you were chosen because of your fearlessness, and I admire that quality in you."

"You flatter me." She smiled.

"It is too bad that your talents are not directed to better purpose," continued Tile. "But that does not alter the fact that you are in a conspiracy against me——"

A burst of laughter checked him. He turned a wondering gaze on her mirthful face.

"You take yourself too seriously," she declared. "What possible interest can I have in you—a total stranger?"

"Sufficient interest to take part in my abduction," he answered. "However, that is past. I am looking toward the future. I want to clear it of certain obstacles to my progress. One of them is my marriage, of which you are undoubtedly

aware. I may speak frankly to you, because you probably know more about this affair than I do."

"I'm not interested in your affairs," she interrupted.

Beneath her seeming indifference, nevertheless, Tile discerned a throbbing curiosity, which he hastened to gratify.

"If I am taking your time," he said, "you owe me a measure of attention. You thrust yourself in my path."

"What are you driving at?" she inquired, with a toss of her head.

"I will get to the point quickly," he replied. "I am married to a woman whose identity is hidden from me. I am convinced, however, that she is one of three with whom I have been thrown in contact. I've put the question squarely to two of them, and they have eliminated themselves from my calculations. You are the third one."

She regarded him with a look of such intense alarm as to justify the conclusion that, at last, he had hit on the right woman.

"Well, what do you want of me?" she demanded, almost savagely.

"I want to know whether you are my wife."

"You are insane, sir!" she ridiculed.

"Then you are not——"

"I am not your wife." Her reply came slowly, emphatically, as if to dispel any lingering doubt which he might possess.

"You're not my wife!" he repeated, half incredulously. "You're not my wife, Mrs. Tile is not my wife, Ethel Sinclair is not my wife! Well, who is my wife?" he demanded desperately. "You know her! You're in league with her! I want an answer! Don't stand there as though frozen into silence!"

She rose and glided towards the door, opening it and holding it wide.

"Good morning, Mr. Tile," she said, with a short, imperious toss of the head.

He stepped into the narrow hall, vehemently demanding enlightenment. She remained entirely unruffled, chin tilted upward as if to avoid meeting his peremptory gaze.

"Very well!" he exclaimed, before she shut the door behind him. "Since you'll not permit me to work with you, I'll work against you."

Panting with the excitement of a new deter-

mination, he stepped out of the lift, and into the lower corridor. He found Carlton, alert and watchful, in a chair near the door.

"She's not the woman!" he whispered to him. "I'm exhausted, upset, befuddled! Let's take a walk—I want a chance to think!"

CHAPTER XVI

A FATEFUL MESSAGE

THE main thoroughfares were thronged with promenaders. The same feverish activity prevailed everywhere about Tile and Carlton. The mighty conglomeration of a city's noises assailed Tile's ears, but he heard not. Humanity, in infinite variety, passed in endless review before his eyes, but he saw not. The afternoon sun spread its warmth impartially, but he felt only the chill of his own disappointment.

Through the richness and diversity of Fifth Avenue Tile passed unheeding, almost unaware of Carlton's presence at his side. His mind, fluctuating between two problems, could grapple successfully with neither. The yearning to find Miss Sinclair, to avow his love, to prove his worthiness, was as unsatisfied as the compelling curiosity with regard to his wife.

Yet, in a way, his course lay clear. First, he must uncouple himself from the woman whose hundred thousand had attached him to her for five years. He had no doubt, at the end of that period, Benson would have the marriage annulled. But to wait nearly five years!—five years of unfulfilled longing, of mental anguish, of painful uncertainty! It was beyond the power of human endurance! For the first time in his life he understood what has been the bitter experience of all the generations through all the ages—the grinding torture of a love that is thwarted. And, in common with all the sufferers who have gone before, and who must follow hereafter, Tile was certain of the impossibility of anyone else ever having endured such torment as his.

Just how he would change his insufferable condition, after he found his wife, did not occur to him. Suffice for the moment to find her, to meet her face to face. As a lawyer he was aware, in a dim way, that once having found her, it would not be an insurmountable task to bring about an annulment of the marriage. The mere threat of publicity probably might force her consent. And then, the three million pounds!

Whether the severance of his marital ties would avail him anything in his determination to win Miss Sinclair, also escaped his mind. But he would fight the destiny that deprived him of her; he would surmount every impeding obstacle.

It was six o'clock when Tile and Carlton got back to the club. From the window, Tile could see the two shadows who had followed him to the home of Mrs. Tile, and who had pursued his footsteps to Miss Fanchot's house, keeping valiant guard across the street. So he did not venture out again.

But he heard nothing from the lawyer that night. And he began to speculate on the appalling disaster which had been communicated to Benson over the telephone.

All that night Tile lay awake, overcome by apprehension. He was glad when morning came and he and Carlton had breakfast. Jimmy pressed for the promised enlightenment, but Tile remained evasive.

"Wait just a few hours," Tile pleaded, and again Carlton agreed.

The morning passed without a sign from

Benson. But the two shadows were still on guard. It suddenly dawned on Tile that he had been played for a victim; that in all this intrigue he was the sure loser.

He had sacrificed the money, but he had retained his wife. And, unless Benson willed it otherwise, that marriage would continue in force. For Tile knew that he could never bring himself to begin legal proceedings that would result only in his public humiliation. He could not go into court and acknowledge that he had married a veiled woman; that he had received a hundred thousand pounds therefor, and that subsequently he had deliberately forfeited the money in a vain effort to win freedom. He could almost see the derisive smiles of his friends, of the entire public, as he admitted that he was unaware of the identity of his wife.

No; legal proceedings were out of the question. He must find some other means out of his predicament. And that brought with it the ever-recurring question, "Who is my wife?"

There was one person who could answer the question, who might even guide him out of his difficulties. His watchers were across the street.

Benson had failed in his promise. Druet might find it advantageous to deal fairly. For, the three millions of securities had not been surrendered.

With a new access of energy Tile got up from his seat and started for the door.

"Jimmy," he said, "I'm going to take things into my own hands."

Crossing the street, he beckoned to the two shadows. They came forward, with an inquiring glance.

"You represent Mr. Druet?" Tile asked.

They eyed him sharply, but ventured no reply.

"Will you deliver a message for me?"

"Perhaps," replied one of the spies.

"Will you tell him that I'm ready to join forces with him? Inform him that I'm ready to enter into a mutual agreement. Also tell him that I still retain the securities."

The two men exchanged sly glances.

"Are you in earnest?" asked the one who appeared to be in command.

"I'm in deadly earnest," came the quick response.

"Very well; we will deliver your message."

"I'll expect to hear from you in an hour," said Tile, leaving them and returning to the club.

"Say, what the devil are you up to now?" inquired Carlton, meeting his friend at the door.

"I'm going to find Miss Sinclair," answered Tile. "Furthermore, I'm going to pull aside the veil of mystery. These fellows are plainly working against Benson. They're trying to discover the same person I am, and I guess my best chance is in working with them. Also, if they have any designs against Miss Sinclair, I'll be on hand to frustrate them."

"And what do you want me to do?"

"Remain with me. I'll not venture out alone."

Tile and Carlton waited impatiently for the men with whom they had joined forces. The big hand of the clock indicated the passing minutes with aggravating slowness.

"Another half hour," remarked Tile, breaking a long silence.

"Do you think they'll come back?" inquired Carlton anxiously.

"I'm sure they will," replied the other. "They'll welcome me as an ally."

But the men did not put in an appearance at

the end of an hour. Two hours sped, and they had not returned. Tile and Carlton waited a third hour. At last, hearing nothing from them, they decided that the man whom the shadows had gone to consult had decided not to avail himself of Tile's offer.

"Let's drop round to the bazaar," suggested Carlton.

"All right," agreed Tile wearily.

They spent the rest of the afternoon in wandering idly from stall to stall. Occasionally they lingered at the counter behind which Miss Townsend played saleswoman for charity, but not for long. The pressure of the day's events engendered a restlessness which kept them moving, their eyes searching for the shadows of the previous night.

No one was following them.

It was six o'clock when the two men returned to the club.

"Has anyone called to see me?" inquired Tile anxiously.

"No, sir," replied the clerk, "but there's a telegram for you."

With a tremor of expectancy, Tile ripped

open the envelope. The changing expression of his face as he read the message brought Carlton close to his elbow. Suddenly, Tile's face cleared, and he handed the telegram to his friend.

Surprise, consternation, incredulity, flashed in succession across Carlton's countenance, as he read:

"Your wife is dying in the Lincoln Hospital, North Pelham. Come quick."

CHAPTER XVII

PISTOLS FOR TWO

"YOUR wife!" gasped Carlton, returning the telegram. "Then you must have been married secretly."

"Well, there wasn't any public fuss over it," returned Tile. "In fact, we even neglected to send out formal announcements."

"Who is she? Do I know her?"

"I don't know," replied Tile, with an equivocal smile. "In fact, I don't know her myself."

Carlton gazed incredulously on his friend. He could not help a growing doubt as to Tile's sanity.

"Why don't you tell me all about the marriage?" he suggested. "It might help me to understand the situation better."

"Get your car," directed Tile. "We'll start at once for North Pelham. This telegram is

probably a ruse, but I can't afford to ignore the possibility that it's genuine. On the way up there, I'll tell you the story from beginning to end."

Fifteen minutes later, the two men started for the hospital in Carlton's big touring-car. They occupied the front seat, Carlton at the wheel, Tile casting apprehensive glances behind, as though fearful of some hidden danger in the tonneau.

In broken sentences, interspersed with deductions and vague speculations, the harassed young man recited the circumstances of his marriage, and the exciting incidents that followed it. They had passed the border line of the Bronx when Tile finished a narrative which must have sounded to Carlton like the delirious outpouring of a fever-scourged brain.

"And all this happened in New York?" commented the clubman.

"Yes—and outside of a lunatic asylum," the other assured him.

"Then the chances are we're heading straight into a trap," pronounced Carlton.

Tile's hand sought for something in his over-

coat pocket. He drew forth a black magazine revolver, and handed it to his companion.

"I have another," he said. "We may be trapped, but they'll have to face these two miniature gatling guns before they get us."

Carlton directed the car cautiously toward Pelham. There were so many dangerous crossings that he dared not risk the speed which they had maintained on the macadamised roads near the city.

The big headlight of the machine cut a luminous path through the darkness of the starless night, and from a smaller reflector Tile sent shafts of light against the thick shrubbery that fringed the road. If anyone lay concealed in those bushes, the spreading rays of the search-light failed to find him.

At North Pelham, the car drew up in front of the railway station, and Tile inquired the way to the Lincoln Hospital from the station-master.

"The Lincoln Hospital is not a hospital any more," the latter replied. "It used to be a small private sanatorium, but that was two years ago. Since then, the house has been remodelled, and

a couple of weeks ago it was leased by someone from New York. There's been people in it since, but I don't know who they are."

"What sort of looking house is it?" asked Tile.

"It's a big, square place, with a lot of ground at the back. But it's easy to miss, because the house is hidden by a lot of big trees."

A sudden idea flashed across Tile's mind. "What sort of gate is in front?" he inquired anxiously.

"It's an iron gateway, set between two cement columns, and there's a long pathway that loses itself among the trees," the station-master informed him. "If you've ever seen it, you'll reçognise it again. It's about a mile and a half on the road to your right."

There was a triumphant note in Tile's voice when he addressed Carlton, after leaving the station-master.

"There's no Lincoln Hospital," he said. "But I've found the house to which I was taken in the cab. Put on full speed, Jimmy! We may meet Miss Sinclair again."

"What the devil do you suppose they brought us right up here for?" ruminated Carlton. "Why

should they reveal her hiding-place by sending the telegram?"

"I don't know why, and I don't care."

The pleasant possibility of meeting Miss Sinclair had aroused Tile's enthusiasm. He threw caution to the winds, and with it the premonition of danger which had possessed him throughout the ride. "If they have led me to her," he added reflectively, "I'll forgive them everything they've done to me."

A turn of the road brought into the glare of the headlight the familiar gateway of the house in which he had spent hours of pleasant imprisonment.

"That's it," said Tile. "Stop at the gate."

As they got out of the car, a man's form was seen to step out of the darkness. At the same time, the gate swung open.

"We expected only one gentleman," said the man, as he thrust himself into the opening to impede their progress. "Only Mr. Tile may enter the house."

"All right," agreed Tile. "You wait outside, Jimmy."

The latter laid a detaining hand firmly on the other's arm.

"Either you permit both of us to enter," he said, "or we both turn back."

By a deft move, the stranger tried to swing the gate shut, so as to leave Tile on one side, and Carlton on the other. But Carlton had anticipated the man's intention, and, when the gate closed, he had drawn Tile outside with him.

"If you gentlemen will wait a moment, I will ask permission to admit both of you," came, in a disappointed tone, from the man within the gate.

They watched him enter the house, observing that the door opened at his approach.

"It's a trick," whispered Carlton. "Get your revolver ready. Keep the muzzle pressed against the side of your pocket. We may not have time to take them out. Above all, don't take your finger off the trigger."

Several minutes elapsed before the guardian of the gate returned. "You may come in," he said, bowing to the visitors.

Tile and Carlton approached the house with increasing agitation. Their right hands held the

weapons concealed in their coat pockets. When they reached the top step, the door opened slightly, so as to admit one at a time. They made no effort to enter.

"Come in!" invited a man's voice from behind the door.

"Not unless you open the door wide enough to admit us at the same time," replied Carlton.

The sudden firmness which had developed in the social idler surprised Tile, but he submitted without protest to the other's domination.

Tile and Carlton entered, and the door closed noiselessly behind them. The man who had opened the gate remained outside.

In the instant in which Carlton noticed the man's absence, he perceived also that the light in the hallway had been lowered to a modest glow, and that the region beyond the broad staircase was in total darkness. Before he had time to grasp the significance of his observations, a switch clicked, and all the lights in the hall went out.

"What does this mean?" shouted Carlton, making a lunge in the direction of the man who had opened the door.

"Throw up your hands!" commanded a voice. At the same time, the thick rays from two bull's-eye lanterns were flashed in the faces of the visitors.

The lights were to Tile and Carlton beacons out of their perplexity. As by a common impulse, they pressed the triggers of their weapons. Two reports rang out, in such quick succession that they seemed as one.

The shots awoke a reverberating echo throughout the house—an echo pierced by the muffled screams of a woman. The voice came from upstairs—at first, so faint as hardly to be distinguishable, but gathering volume as the other noises subsided.

Mingling with the cry of distress were the groans of two men, who had lurched against the wall and slid to the floor. Their gleaming lamps were like two large eyes upturned to the ceiling.

The bullets had found their marks. They had torn through the pockets of the marksmen, and embedded themselves in the flesh of the men at the rear of the hall.

Tile's first impulse was to rush upstairs and

rescue the woman, whose appeal affected him more deeply than did the agonised groans of the wounded men. But Carlton had not lost his caution. He picked up one of the small lamps, and flashed it about the hall. Cowering in a corner, as if the shots had unnerved him completely, stood the man who had opened the door for them. He had tried to efface himself from the scene by merging with the shadows of the wall.

The shaft of light which revealed him found him trying to turn the knob of the heavy portal.

"No, you don't!" shouted Carlton quickly. "If you open that door, I'll fill you full of bullets."

The man desisted, turning an appealing countenance towards Tile and Carlton.

"My companions—they are hurt," he said. "Shall I get a doctor?"

"We'll attend to that," Carlton informed him curtly. "You just lift your hands above your head while my friend goes through your pockets."

Tile searched the man, but found no weapon. Nor was there anything else on him that shed

any light on the motive which prompted those in the house to send the telegram.

"Turn on the lights," commanded Carlton, at the same time levelling the pistol at the wretched figure near the door.

The man hesitated, but a movement of the revolver brought about his quick obedience. His trembling fingers found the switch, which set the electric bulbs aglow.

The wretched men had lifted themselves to sitting postures against the wall. As the light fell on their faces, Tile and Carlton uttered exclamations of surprise.

"Our friends, the shadows!" pronounced Carlton. "So you invited us up here, instead of keeping the appointment at the club—eh? Well, let's see where you're wounded."

They ordered the third man to sit by the side of his friends, and, while Tile stood guard over them with his revolver, Carlton examined their wounds.

One of the men was wounded in the shoulder; the other had a bullet wound in the right knee.

"I think we've also seen the third gentleman before," remarked Tile suddenly.

"Oh, yes—I recall the face," replied Carlton. "He's one of the fellows who followed us home after the bazaar. I suppose his partner is the man who opened the gate." Glancing down at the floor, he observed two revolvers lying four or five feet from the injured men. "Pick them up," he said to Tile. "We'll each take one of them."

Though his nerves were still quivering with the excitement of the past few minutes, Tile could not help admiring the masterful manner in which his friend handled the situation. The *rôle* which Carlton was playing was one which his most ardent admirer would have hesitated to assign to him. As an abstract possibility, Carlton, with revolver in hand, ministering to a scoundrel whom he had shot, would have appeared a ludicrous spectacle. Yet here he was, cool as though leading his partner to supper, anticipating every move of the enemy, calculating every danger, but without fear or nervousness.

"I don't think the condition of our friends will be aggravated by a little wait before we wash their wounds and put them to bed," remarked Carlton. "Run upstairs, Fred, and find the distressed female who called for help."

The wounded men said not a word. Their faces betrayed only the physical pain they were suffering.

"I'll keep you folks covered with my gun," continued Carlton, as Tile hurried up the steps. "And"—his voice rose to a high pitch—"if any one upstairs gets funny with my friend, three corpses will be taken out of this house. The pistol I hold is a magazine revolver, of the very latest pattern."

Breathless with excitement, Tile reached the top of the stairs. He knocked instinctively on the door of Miss Sinclair's room.

There was no answer.

"If anyone is in there, open the door before I break it down," he called.

"Mr. Tile!" responded a woman's voice. There was no doubt in Tile's mind as to the owner of the voice; its musical inflection had lingered in his mind, these days, like a happy melody.

"Miss Sinclair!" he responded. "Open the door. We're here to help you."

"I can't—it's locked!" she shouted.

It required half a dozen vigorous kicks to

force it open. When finally Tile entered the room, his frame throbbed under the emotions which Miss Sinclair's presence aroused. Most gratifying of all, however, was the expression of undisguised joy with which she greeted him.

The face which had been contracted with irony and scorn the last time he had seen it, was now expressive of sweetness and gratitude.

In his exuberance of spirits, he was about to embrace her, but she drew back, with a flutter of alarm.

"I heard revolver shots," she said.

"Yes—we wounded two of them."

"We? Are there two of you?"

"Yes—a friend, Mr. Carlton, accompanied me to the house."

"How did you find the place?"

"They sent me a telegram, saying that my wife was dying in the Lincoln Hospital. They evidently learned that this place was a hospital at one time, and imagined that I would inquire its whereabouts when I reached North Pelham."

"Mr. Sevier—have you seen him?" asked Miss Sinclair, in some alarm.

"No. Where is he?"

"He's in one of the rooms upstairs. They wounded him when they attacked the house."

"So there was excitement round here?"

The girl closed her eyes, as though to shut out the memory of what had transpired. "Let us find him," she said.

They found Sevier in bed on the upper floor of the house. The door was locked, and Tile had to force it.

Sevier sat bolt upright when he recognised the visitor. "You! How did you get here?" he gasped.

Tile explained. The blissful expression which overspread Sevier's face brought a responsive smile to Tile's countenance.

"And they had planned to murder you!" remarked Sevier, as if there were something amusing in the mere contemplation of it.

"And what would they have gained by my death?" asked Tile, unable to catch the other's good humour.

"Everything," replied the wounded man. "She would have been free."

"Well, who the devil is she?"

A shade flitted across Sevier's face, and Miss Sinclair averted her gaze.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tile, you asked that," came from the man in the bed. "I feel so kindly disposed toward you just now that, really, I regret to see you throw away twenty thousand pounds."

Tile laughed bitterly. "The last note I received from the trust company informed me that I had forfeited the fortune," he said.

"Then you have wantonly thrown away the money," commented Sevier.

"Yes—I did it deliberately," acknowledged the young man. "Moreover, I'm glad of it; for it hung like a millstone about my neck. I shall now set out to prove myself worthy of—worthy of——" he repeated. But he did not finish the sentence.

"There are human beings suffering below," Miss Sinclair broke in. "They ought to have medical attention."

"Yes—they were considerate enough to send a physician to look after me," rejoined Sevier. "I don't know who he was, but he was certainly familiar with gunshot wounds."

"I'll go downstairs and see what can be done," observed Tile. He hastened below, where Carlton was still guarding the three men.

"How about a doctor?" he asked.

"I'll telephone Dr. Holt," replied Carlton, "while you keep your eyes on our friends. I can trust him to look after them without reporting the case to the police—that is, if you don't want police interference."

"I don't," declared Tile.

When Carlton returned from the telephone, the wounded men were carried to a room and placed comfortably in bed. The third man was directed to sit at the foot of the bed, while Carlton took a position of command near the door.

"Who's in the other rooms?" he asked.

"Miss Sinclair and Sevier," replied Tile.

"I presume the fellow who opened the gate got away." A thought occurred to Carlton, which brought a scowl to his face. "Perhaps he eloped with my car," he said. "Just look out of the window and see if it's there."

Tile threw up the shade and looked out. "It's still there," he reassured his friend. "Now, I'll return to Miss Sinclair."

He entered the room as the young woman and Sevier were discussing something in an undertone.

"I'm sorry I've intruded," he said apologetically.

"No intrusion whatsoever," assured Sevier. "We've been discussing the course to pursue, and Miss Sinclair and I have decided to ask Mr. Benson to come here."

"Very well," agreed Tile.

"Then Miss Sinclair will telephone at once."

"May I accompany her downstairs?" asked Tile.

"I should hesitate to go without you," she replied.

Tile did not dare express what was on his mind as they descended to the ground floor, although he was bursting with the desire to avow his love.

"I'll wait until I learn more of this affair," he said to himself. "The solution of the mystery must be close at hand."

At the bottom step they became conscious of a series of raps against the outer door. There were two short knocks, followed by three others.

at longer intervals. Evidently, the tapping was a signal for admittance.

"Go upstairs," directed Tile. "I'll open the door."

"No—I'll remain with you," replied the girl. "You may need my help."

Revolver in hand, Tile opened the door cautiously.

A man thrust his way in, with an air of proprietorship. He was a dark-visaged stranger —tall, broad of shoulder, with a forehead of unusual width, covered partly by a high-crowned derby hat. As he entered, he blurted something in a foreign tongue which Tile did not understand.

Tile pressed the muzzle of the revolver against the man's breast. "One suspicious move, and I fire," he cautioned.

Miss Sinclair stood as if petrified. The stranger threw a glance of recognition at her, then moved forward. He was stopped by the pressure of the revolver against his body.

"What does this mean, Miss Sinclair?" he asked in English.

"It means that this gentleman has turned the tables," she replied in a frigid voice. "Mr. Benson's presence is now more necessary than ever. When I have finished telephoning, we will escort this man to Mr. Sevier's room," she added, turning to Tile.

CHAPTER XVIII

HIS HIGHNESS' GAME

THE captive showed marked respect for Tile's weapon, although he regarded the young woman with almost a sneer on his thick lips. Behind the outward attitude of indifference which the prisoner maintained, Tile detected quivers of anxiety, which bespoke a growing apprehension, as of one who, expecting to ensnare, finds himself ensnared.

Tile did not underestimate the importance of the stranger, or the necessity of ensuring the advantage which the possession of the revolver gave him.

"Just step forward a foot or two," he ordered. "A little distance between us will make me feel more comfortable." The man edged away, as if glad to increase the distance between him and

the weapon. "Halt!" commanded Tile. That's far enough. I want to keep you within easy range, but beyond reaching distance of the revolver."

"Is it necessary to call Mr. Benson?" asked the man.

Miss Sinclair paused on her way to the telephone. "It is," she replied.

The captive's eyes remained fixed on her, while she lifted the receiver and called the lawyer at his home. A savage scowl contorted his face, and did not leave his features throughout the time of the conversation between the young woman and Benson.

"Mr. Benson will be here directly," said Miss Sinclair, returning the receiver to the hook. "Meantime, I believe Mr. Sevier will be happy to meet you again." She directed her remark to the captive, who bowed submissively.

"I am under a distinct disadvantage," he declared, casting a sidelong glance at Tile.

Miss Sinclair led the way up the stairs, the prisoner following, Tile bringing up the rear. Not once did the latter relax his vigilance. He felt that a crisis had been reached in his affairs,

and he was determined not to let it slip past him.

Sevier met the dark-visaged individual with a grin so malignant, so full of burning hatred, that Tile would not have been surprised to see him get out of bed and attempt to throttle the stranger. But the wound kept Sevier between the sheets.

"We meet under different conditions than the last time," he rasped.

"Somewhat different," acknowledged the other.

Sevier pointed an accusing finger at him. "And before we're through, I shall square the account between us."

"I am not aware of any differences——"

"No. Your highness is probably unaware of a good many things that have transpired in your absence," Sevier broke in.

The remark confirmed Tile's guess that the visitor was a person of rank. His mind lit with understanding; he began to comprehend things which previously had baffled him.

The nobleman said something in a foreign tongue, and Sevier replied:

"We will converse in English. I want Mr. Tile to hear what passes between us."

"Mr. Tile," repeated the other, at the same time throwing a look of baffled rage at the young man with the revolver. "So you are the one who married——"

"She is his wife," interrupted Sevier hastily.

Tile turned appealingly toward Miss Sinclair. She had dropped into a chair, her body almost rigid, her lips quivering, her hands pressing against her heart as if to moderate its pulsations.

"He is the man you meant to murder," continued Sevier, in even tones. "He is the man you lured here with the decoy telegram. Perhaps he desires to be revenged."

Tile's senses were swimming. He remained wrapped in attentive silence.

"I did not expect to find him alive," the nobleman admitted. "Much less did I expect to find myself facing the weapon in his hand."

"Yes—our best plans miscarry sometimes," declared Sevier. "You are now completely at our mercy. Two of your men have been wounded; a third is being held captive. The one who escaped—well, he'll not interfere with us again."

"Where are the injured men?" The visitor asked the question in a cold, unemotional voice.

"They are in the house," replied Sevier. "I'm not worrying about them. It is pleasant, though, your highness, to be able to speak frankly with you. When you humiliated me—when, through your machinations, my office was torn from me—I did not dream that my revenge was so close at hand." There was a quaver in his voice, as if his words had rekindled emotions long suppressed. "I did not dream that conditions would arise whereby, to secure your own future eminence, an alliance with"—he checked himself —"with her was indispensable. And when I learned that the alliance was obnoxious to her, I offered my services, with such willingness as you may imagine."

"Perhaps you have served her too well," suggested the other.

"That remains to be seen," breathed Sevier. "It was through the kindness and loyalty of Miss Sinclair that I was enabled to bring her safely to this country. And when we learned of your pursuit——"

"You induced her to marry this gentleman,"

the nobleman finished for him. "And, I presume, you wish further to inform him that, when we learned of the marriage, we decided to kill him. That would have left her in exactly the same position as when she fled from her native country. But I will tell him that, had there been a sudden change in dynasty—had he stood between her and the throne—you would not have hesitated to sacrifice him."

It gave Tile a grim satisfaction to hear them exchange mutual confidences as to what they might have done to himself. He realised that one would have brought about his death as readily as would the other. And the end of their plotting was that he held them both at the point of his revolver.

"My services belonged to her," declared Sevier, in a solemn voice.

Further conversation was interrupted by a violent knocking on the street door.

"That's the doctor," said Tile. "Miss Sinclair, will you take the revolver while I go below?"

"I'll open the door," she volunteered.

"But it may be another of these conspirators," he warned her. She paid no heed to his

remarks. Before he was able to restrain her, she had left the room.

"Now, to resume the trend of my remarks," said Sevier. "Mr. Tile has played a most unwilling *rôle* in this intrigue. The net result of his participation, so far as he is concerned, is that he has lost a fortune. He has played a losing game."

There was a contradiction of Sevier's words in the glance which Tile shot at Miss Sinclair. She had caught the silent message of his eyes, and, in return, bestowed on him a smile of encouragement which sent a thrill through every fibre of his being.

"Your highness," continued Sevier, with undisguised satisfaction, "you also have lost. You will remain a prisoner in this house until we see fit to release you. Your men will remain here to keep you company. Incidentally, I might add that, had it not been for a sense of false security, which caused me to send my guards where there was more need of them, the assault of your men on this house would have been futile."

"I wondered at the weak show of resistance

that was made," commented his highness. "We were prepared for a bitter fight."

"The guards will be back to-morrow," Sevier informed him. "They will receive orders to shoot straight, and shoot to kill, if any effort is made to escape from this place. While you are enjoying yourself here, the complications which have arisen within the last three months will be adjusted in a manner satisfactory to her."

"And to yourself," sneered the nobleman.

"My interests are interwoven with hers," returned Sevier. "And now," he added, "if Mr. Tile will open the second drawer of the chiffonier, he'll find a pair of handcuffs. The honour of encircling your highness' wrists with them is one which I covet. Unfortunately, the bullet which one of your men sent into my back deprives me of that pleasure. Therefore, I shall delegate the task to Mr. Tile. It will be inconvenient, I know, to have your wrists linked, but it is a necessary precaution until the guards return. We cannot afford to permit your departure at this critical stage of the case."

CHAPTER XIX

EXPLANATIONS

As Tile slipped the handcuffs on the wrists of the nobleman, the door opened and Benson stepped into the room.

An exclamation of surprise came from the lips of the others.

"Having received word that the house was again in friendly hands," the lawyer explained, "I admitted myself with the pass-key. I see you have a prisoner," he added.

"We have several captives," responded Tile frigidly. "Mr. Benson, you are one of them."

"I—a prisoner!" gasped the lawyer.

"Exactly!" replied Tile. "We have several things to adjust."

"There is no necessity for revolvers and handcuffs," Benson smiled. But his smile lost its

warmth as he turned it on the nobleman. "As soon as Mr. Tile is ready to remove the steel bracelets, your highness is free to go," he added.

"What!" blurted Sevier.

"He may go where he chooses," came, in indifferent tones, from Benson. "And his henchmen are at liberty to follow him."

"But," protested the man in bed, "what of her?"

"She is beyond his power," replied the lawyer, with a comprehensive glance about the room. He bent a searching gaze on Tile, as if trying to read his thoughts. "Mr. Tile," he continued affably, "you may put away that weapon. There can be no further use for it."

But experience had instilled into the young man a caution which made him grip the revolver all the tighter.

"You needn't be afraid of the gun," he said. "I'll not shoot unless I have to. But if another trick is to be tried on me, I warn you that I know how to shoot straight."

"There will be no tricks," assured Benson.

"Now, where is Mr. Druet?" demanded Tile.

"Mr. Druet is now in my house," answered

the lawyer. The reply brought looks of amazement to the faces of Sevier and Miss Sinclair. "I believe I have convinced him of the futility of further resistance to the cause of——" He hesitated an instant, then closed his lips tightly.

"My wife!" Tile finished the sentence for him. "And now, Mr. Benson, where is she?"

"She is on the ocean," the lawyer answered without hesitancy. "She sailed this morning."

"And I'm never to see her?" Tile's baffled curiosity brought an indulgent smile to Benson's face.

"A meeting might have proved embarrassing, so we avoided it," he said.

"But the securities—the three millions! What of them?"

"We have your promise to release them when I have convinced you that steps have been taken to sever your marital ties. I am ready to offer the proofs. Proceedings have already been instituted to annul the marriage on the ground of desertion immediately after the ceremony."

"That's impossible in this State," Tile pointed out.

"The action will be heard before a referee in another State, where the lady established a residence immediately after the marriage."

"But why didn't you keep your appointment with me at the club? Why did you keep me in suspense?" persisted the young man.

"Because I got word over the telephone that they had attacked the house. The connection was broken before I was able to ask a single question, so I surmised that the house had been captured. It required twenty-four hours for me to reach Mrs. Tile and get her aboard ship. You see, she was never in this house."

"Yes, we realised that!" came the disappointed exclamation from his highness. "We were fooled."

"Yes, we kept the place in readiness to receive her, had you and Mr. Druet found her real whereabouts. But our manœuvres bewildered you as much as they fooled Mr. Tile."

"But she's gone abroad!" cried the handcuffed prisoner exultantly. "We haven't lost yet!"

"Oh, yes, you have!" Benson responded coldly. "We hold the reins."

"And in all this plotting, where do I stand?" demanded Tile.

Benson regarded him indulgently. "You have forfeited the trust fund that was placed to your credit," he said. "The circumstances that necessitated the creation of the fund no longer exist. We are through with you."

A gleam of triumph shot from Tile's eyes, impinged itself on Benson's mind, remaining there with irritating assertiveness.

"You are through with me!" the young man exclaimed jauntily. "Good! But I'm not through with you. Sit down, Mr. Benson!" he ordered.

The old lawyer obeyed, but with an impatient toss of his head.

"Now, Mr. Benson," continued Tile, "there are several small unexplained items in our account. First is the magic paper by which Mr. Sevier was able to command the services of the police department against me. That's rather a dangerous document to have outstanding against one. I want it." His tone dropped to a gruff command.

"Give it to him," directed Benson, waving his hand toward Sevier.

"It's in my coat," replied the latter. "Open the wardrobe, and you'll find it on the first hook."

Benson started for the wardrobe.

"No, you don't!" cried Tile, scenting danger. "I'll get it myself." He backed toward the wardrobe, opened the door, and groped for the coat. Out of one of the pockets he drew a bundle of papers, and tossed them to Sevier.

"Here it is," cried the latter, throwing back a folded document.

Tile's legal mind gathered the contents of the paper at a glance. "A commitment!" he exclaimed, almost incredulously. "How did you obtain the signature of the Justice of the Supreme Court?"

"Very simple," returned Benson. "You see, we were prepared for almost anything. When it became apparent that your curiosity had overcome your judgment, we thought it might become necessary to detain you in some safe place. So, Miss Sinclair made affidavit to your strange remarks on the night of the Trask reception, and by appending to her sworn statement the certificates of two physicians, who affirmed that you

were violently insane, we had you committed to the Lincoln Sanatorium. You know, as a lawyer, that an application for a commitment is an *ex-parte* proceeding."

"And the carriage in which I was brought to this house was a conveyance used by sanatoriums for violent maniacs?" questioned Tile.

Benson nodded assent. "I hope you'll forgive our misuse of the courts," he added.

"That was rather risky business for a reputable lawyer to engage in," rejoined Tile. "With this paper in my possession, I could make it exceedingly uncomfortable for you."

"Hardly," chuckled Benson. "I simply acted as attorney for Miss Sinclair. She signed the application for your commitment, and I had no reason to doubt her good faith."

All the blood left the young woman's face as her duplicity was brought home to her by the crafty Benson. She was unable to meet Tile's steady gaze, and averted her head.

"I forgive Miss Sinclair," said the young man. "All her actions, I know, sprang from a sense of loyalty to the woman about whom this entire intrigue was centred."

"Correct!" snapped Benson.

An expression ineffably tender overspread Miss Sinclair's face, and Tile felt amply rewarded for his forgiveness.

"From what I gathered of the conversation between Mr. Sevier and the gentleman whose liberty Mr. Benson has just returned, I have a faint idea of the circumstances that led up to my marriage." Tile spoke as if his mind were undergoing a gradual illumination. "The lady, whoever she may be, evidently objected to becoming the wife of his highness. He, in turn, found it to his interest to urge an alliance repulsive to her, and pursued her with the inveteracy of a titled adventurer searching for an heiress. Is that correct, Mr. Benson?"

"Quite right," assented the lawyer.

"Now," continued Tile, "the pursuit became so hot that the lady was compelled to fly to this country. His highness"—there was a touch of irony in his tone—"learned of her flight, and started after her. To baffle him, she married me." He eyed the lawyer quizzically.

"You should have been a detective," commended Benson. "Your summary of the situation does credit to your faculty for deduction."

"But why," asked Tile, disregarding the compliment, "was I chosen for the bridegroom?"

"Simply because your name happened to be Frederick Tile," replied Benson. "Mr. Frederick Tile, whose home you visited, started on a mission connected with this case. It has been successful, and the lady is now in a position of command—she is supreme in her land. We feared that his highness, who is possessed of ample means, and, until to-day, exercised almost unlimited authority at a certain legation, would learn of the marriage. Also, we feared that he would learn of Mr. Tile's mission. Events proved that our fears were well founded. But we baffled him by finding another Mr. Tile—yourself—in the directory. When he learned that the lady had married a Mr. Tile, and that a Mr. Tile had started for the other side to checkmate his moves, he naturally thought it was the husband of the lady whom he was seeking, who went abroad.

"That little misconception," added Benson smilingly, "saved your life. For, had he stumbled on you at once, he would have brought about your assassination. The lady would have been

left husbandless—which is what he wanted, next to having her as his wife."

"Out of this tangled affair," said Tile, "only one thing remains obscured to me. Who is my wife?"

Sevier, Benson, and Miss Sinclair exchanged questioning glances. His highness looked stolidly into the distance.

"I insist on an answer," commanded Tile.

"Mr. Tile," his highness suddenly broke out, "this morning, you made a certain proposition to two of Mr. Druet's men. We thought you were laying a trap for them, and directed them not to visit you again. Instead, I arranged the little counterplot which brought you to this house. If you are still willing to work with us, I will reveal the lady's identity to you. Furthermore, you shall be rewarded far beyond what these people offered you."

Miss Sinclair shot at Tile a glance of appeal, which caused him to decide on the instant.

"Your offer does not tempt me," he said. "The lady's identity is of no material moment to me, and your money I wouldn't touch under any consideration."

A short silence was broken by Benson.

"Mr. Tile," he said, "events have transpired within the last week that will find their way into the newspapers eventually. An old dynasty has been overthrown, and a new one set up, without the spilling of a drop of blood. That was the work accomplished by Mr. Tile. For that reason, his highness may do as he pleases, hereafter. He is now her subject; he must seek her forgiveness, or remain expatriated. But Mr. Sevier, Miss Sinclair, and I are under the most solemn obligation not to breathe her name in connection with the incidents which have occurred in this country. I will impose silence on his highness by informing him that, if he dare mention her name, he loses all hope of ever obtaining the slightest consideration at her hands.

"As I said before," continued Benson, "within a very short time, the public will know what has occurred on the other side. It will then be comparatively easy for you to guess who she is. I ask you now, on behalf of the woman you married, and on behalf of Miss Sinclair, to pledge me your silence."

Tile looked inquiringly at the girl. The blood had returned to her face; her eyes shone with renewed lustre.

"Please promise," she asked.

"I do," Tile replied quickly. "Your request is a command to me." He arose, placed the revolver in his pocket, and took a step forward. "These revelations have left me bewildered," he said. "I shall return to the club. But before I go, may I have a few words in private with you, Miss Sinclair?"

Her brow flushed with emotions which accelerated the beating of her heart. It was as though she divined what was coming, and gave herself up to it unresistingly, almost fervently.

"Before I leave," continued Tile, addressing himself to Benson, "I want to know how soon my marital ties will be severed?"

"You will be free at the end of six months," the lawyer informed him. "When you reach your home you will be served with a copy of the summons and complaint in the case. Will you then surrender the securities which, you are aware, simply were entrusted to you for safe keeping?"

"Yes!" came the prompt response.

After which, Tile and Miss Sinclair left the three men to transact what further business they had with one another, and descended to the big sitting-room.

CHAPTER XX

THE FINAL SURPRISE

As he gazed on her, standing in the warm glow of the huge fireplace, the flood-gates of his pent-up love swung open, and he extended wide his arms as if to embrace her on the spot. She did not recoil from his advance. The young man seized the girl in his arms and pressed her close to him. Tears welled in her eyes, and overflowed her cheeks. He felt their warm dampness against his lips as he drew her tighter in his embrace.

"Ethel?" he breathed, "will you be my wife?"

She did not reply. Her frame was throbbing; deep sobs accompanied her tears. For the first time, he became aware that she was in distress.

"I'll take your silence as an affirmative answer," he said.

"No—no!" she cried. "You mustn't! I cannot be your wife."

His eyes widened in consternation; a great fear sprang up in his soul. "Is there a barrier?" he blurted.

"Yes," she sobbed.

"Other than my marriage?"

A pitiful toss of her head was the only answer she could give.

"What is it?" he insisted. "Tell me—be frank with me. Ethel, I love you. You made me ashamed of the mercenary marriage I contracted. But necessity drove me to it. Ethel, I was penniless and in debt when they placed the temptation before me. But I have sacrificed the money—I forfeited it deliberately—only to justify myself before you. I'm poor, now. I shall have to begin all over again. But I'm going to work—I'm going to make good. Won't you let me make good for you?"

She heard his outburst with increasing emotion, then drew away from him, and buried her face in her hands.

"You don't know all," she said. "If you were

aware of the part I've played, you couldn't love me. I'm ashamed of my duplicity."

"I—I don't understand!" gasped the young man.

"My conduct has been wretched," continued the girl, in tears. "I've deceived you—deliberately."

Tile recoiled as from a sudden blow. His heart sank as though oppressed by a heavy load. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I lured you on," she confessed, as if each word brought a tinge of pain. "They set me to ensnare you. They wanted you to fall in love with me, so as to keep better watch of you. And I agreed to it. I thought you were just a mercenary tool, ready to sacrifice your last vestige of self-respect for money. I knew I could never love a man like that. But I know you better—I love you."

Tile knew the agony she felt, and permitted his arm to slip round her waist.

"I believe in your sincerity," he said soothingly. "We'll let the end atone for our miserable beginning."

"But you don't know all," she murmured. "Listen—I was drawn into her service abroad. When my parents died, the small income they left me was insufficient to maintain me. So I became her companion. But I recoiled against ensnaring you, although I didn't know you. It went against my nature. They assured me that you were unworthy of the slightest consideration, and then they made a proposal which I accepted. The money you forfeited goes to me. That was my reward."

She looked up at him with anguished eyes, her bosom heaved violently, her breath came painfully through half-open lips.

"That is all," she said, her head drooping as if it had become too heavy for her shoulders.

Tile regarded her silently, his dazed mind unable to grasp her confession. As he gazed on her, her beauty seemed to take on added charm; her contrition heightened the irresistible qualities of her womanhood. Gradually, his thoughts shaped themselves to his love, and, leaving her for an instant, he stepped into the hall.

"Jimmy!" he called, from the foot of the

stairs. "Jimmy! You may leave them up there. Come down here."

Carlton, obeying the call, hastened down the stairs, in alarm. He stepped into the sitting-room. pistol cocked for instant action.

"I—I beg your pardon," he stammered, on seeing Miss Sinclair. Thrusting the revolver into his pocket, he turned to Tile. "What does this mean?" he asked.

"It means that Miss Sinclair has consented to be my wife," said Tile, turning upon the blushing girl eyes which commanded her acquiescence.

THE END

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